



# Cartel Cobra (Morally Gray Kingpins #5)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** Esteban—I don't care whose daughter she is. I don't care whose sister she is. I don't care who she's supposed to marry. She's going to marry me. Luciana Diaz may be one of the most untouchable women in Colombia, but I want nothing more than to run my hands over her body. She's intelligent, funny, independent, and not mine. Yet. I'm a cobra coiled tight and ready to strike.

Luciana—I have a man I'm supposed to marry. A man I thought I could love one day. But Esteban Cardenas... He's everything I shouldn't want but can't get enough of. My father will kill me if he finds out, and my brothers will kill him when they find out. I'm torn between duty and desire. I know who I should pick, but I don't know that I can now that I've tasted passion. He sank his fangs in me, and I'm at his mercy.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

### Luciana

My brothers might be the ones always looking over their shoulders for the gun pointing at them, but they aren't the only ones with a sixth sense for when they're being watched. I grew up in the Cartel just like them.

I sweep my gaze around the cafe, trying to be inconspicuous as I search for the person watching me.

I shift in my seat to see farther to my right.

My father and brothers drilled it into my sister and me as children to never sit with our backs to a window or door.

I'm angled with my back to the wall, so I can see the door and the windows.

However, the three tables to my right aren't within my direct line of sight.

I shift in my chair as I reach back into my purse for my phone.

It gives me an excuse to glance in that direction before appearing to look in my bag.

I could fish around in it and easily find my phone since I carry very little with me.

Another lesson learned as a child, except my mother taught me that.

The fewer identifiable things I keep in it, the harder it would be for someone to know I'm the jefe de jefes' daughter and the less a captor could use against me.

I spy a man—the single most attractive man I've ever seen—working at a computer. Our gazes meet, but I'm quick to look away as though I didn't register him. But I did.

?Hostia puta! Holy fuck.

He's hot. Like insanely hot.

I'm certain he was the one watching me. I don't know why, and that makes me nervous.

I want to be flattered, but someone that attractive doesn't notice someone like me unless he knows who my family is.

I mean, I do okay, but I'm not model level pretty.

He and I aren't in the same league. We're not even playing the same sport.

I shouldn't even be contemplating whether any man finds me attractive, and I'm reminded of that as I notice my engagement ring.

Some days it feels like a vise around my finger.

After the conversation I just had with Domingo, it's feeling exceptionally tight.

The thought turns my stomach over, and I feel clammy.

I glance at the clock on my phone before tilting my head toward the restroom.

My guard knows I'm safe going alone since the family who owns this place is Cartel.

They'd never let anything happen to me. I don't even worry about losing the table when I get up, but I'm not foolish enough to leave my purse behind to save it.

I head down the hallway and around the corner before ducking into the restroom.

I take a few deep breaths before putting a wet paper towel across the back of my neck.

It's fucking hot as hell outside, but it's air conditioned in here.

I can't blame the weather for the heat that feels like it's emanating from me. I close my eyes and inhale.

Buck up, buttercup.

I learned that in the States while I was in college. Bizarre phrase, but it fits.

I'm unprepared for the strange man waiting outside the door. I nearly slam into him. I take a step back and bump into the door. I'm ready to reach back and duck inside, but his gaze pins me in place.

“Hola .”

“Who are you?” Maybe I could be politer.

“You don't know?” Maybe he could be less smug.

“Should I?” It's my turn to cock an eyebrow with arrogance.

“Do you answer every question with a question?”

“Do you always do the same?”

I shouldn't be back here alone. I shouldn't be talking to a stranger. I shouldn't be so intrigued. I shouldn't be a lot of things—like stupid enough to stay where I am when anyone could walk around the corner and see us talking.

“I'm Esteban, and you're Luciana Diaz.”

“How do you know who I am?” Intrigue just skyrocketed to fear.

“Do you really believe there's anyone in Bogotá who doesn't know you're the jefe de jefes' daughter? That your brother is el tigre ? That your other brother is el secretariat ? Your family isn't exactly low profile.”

That might be true, but those are the very reasons no one discusses who my family is with me. He's got some serious huevos —balls—or a death wish to do it.

“If you already know so much about me, then why ask?”

“I wanted you to tell me on your own.”

Smug bastard. He could have made that sound sweet, but he didn't. It was more like he wanted me to do what he wanted.

“You didn't give me your last name, but you already know mine.”

“Cardenas.”

Put a de madre . Motherfucker. I've heard of him.

“As in my tío’s henchman?”

He’s still deliciously handsome. However, anyone connected to Tío Humberto is immediately suspect and not someone I want anywhere near me.

“I work for your tío .”

“You struck up the conversation with me, and now you’re evasive. I’m bored.”

I make to step around him, but he shifts to block me. Knowing what I do now, I should be afraid. More fool am I for not being scared. He isn’t intimidating me, and for a moment he appeared to regret being connected to that pedazo de mierda . Piece of shit.

“Don’t walk away.”

His tone is softer, but there’s a command to it.

If he were anyone else, it would be a major turn on.

But I can’t afford anyone to see me talking to him, and I don’t believe he wouldn’t tell my tío every single thing I say.

I don’t believe he wouldn’t tell my tío how many times I breathed in this conversation.

My guard will go ape shit if he discovers me talking to my tío’s henchman.

I know what I’ve heard is a fraction of what this man’s done as an enforcer.

“Then say something interesting because right now I want nothing to do with any

man who works for my tío . You're untrustworthy, so there's little you can say that I want to hear."

"I think there's plenty you'd want to hear, chiquita ."

The way he says that last word. Little girl.

I force myself not to breathe heavier. I refuse to soften how my gaze hardened the moment I recognized his name.

I want to ignore how my pussy aches and how much my body wants to know what he feels like pressed against mine.

I shouldn't be attracted to him, but I am, and I hate myself a little for it.

"I doubt that, viejo ."

He leans to whisper in my ear, and I struggle not to shiver.

"I'm not that much older than you, but I'm definitely more of a man than the little prick you sat with earlier."

He straightens, and I lift my chin as defiantly as I can muster. I try to look down my nose at him even though he's so much taller than me. Like a foot, easily.

"Move."

He grins at my attempt to command him. He steps aside and winks.

The fucker winks! I turn away from him and walk back to my table as though I didn't just have one of the most disturbing conversations of my life.

I sink into my seat and try to remember that other people can see me now.

Men have threatened and held me at gunpoint and knifepoint before.

I've defended myself with violence more than once.

That was still one of the most nerve-wracking experiences I've ever had.

"Hey."

I smile at my sister as she greets me and slips into her seat.

"Were you waiting long? Matáis didn't want to say goodbye."

Catalina waggles her eyebrows at me, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. She and her fiancé are nauseatingly sweet.

"You'll see him in like an hour when he comes over for dinner."

She shrugs unrepentantly and grins. They've been together for three years, and they still can't get enough of each other.

They met through our brothers, Enrique and Luis, when she was home for the summer between junior and senior year of college.

Turns out they were both in Boston for university, which made dating convenient.

Catalina was at MIT while Matáis went to Harvard. They've been inseparable ever since.

"You'll see Domingo for dinner, too."



We stare at each other, and we both know only one of us is excited to see her fiancé. Papá knows there isn't a chance in hell Catalina would give up Matáis to marry someone he chose. Matáis would annihilate any man foolish enough to look the wrong way in my sister's direction.

So that leaves me. I'm the one making the political match for my family's sake.

Matáis's family is already allied with mine, but Domingo's won't be until the ink is dry on the marriage certificate.

My ring felt tighter than ever because he was pushing me to set a wedding date today.

We've been engaged for a year, and college gave me an excuse for delaying.

But I graduated last month and have moved back to Bogotá.

Papá 's breathing down my neck too. He won't drag me down the aisle, but he's giving me some hard shoves.

I'm doing everything I can to dig my heels in and go nowhere.

"Did you have another argument with Domingo?"

"No, but only because we're in public. That's why I met him here. I knew he wouldn't cause a scene."

Our family runs Colombia. Not like runs the government as elected officials but runs the government because we have more money than the Vatican.

Our father controls every import and export the country has.

Nothing comes in or out of a port in this country without him agreeing.

Domingo's family were rivals with mine before papá inherited his position fifteen years ago.

They've tried to assert themselves a few times, and both sides have lost good men because of it.

Papá ' s trying to create peace, and the only way Domingo's father would agree was for Domingo to marry me.

## Page 2

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It's a sign of good faith on both parts.

Papá 's trusting Domingo with me, and Domingo gets a senior position in return.

We're getting a rival to bend the knee by making the heir a glorified employee.

All the while, I'm doing my best not to resent everyone around me.

My brothers basically live in the States now, even though they go back and forth between here and there all the fucking time.

My sister's with a man who adores her and who she adores. And I'm...

Well, I'm stuck trying not to stare at the hottest but now most unappealing man I've ever seen.

Regardless of him and how he keeps drawing my attention, I'm trying not to wish I was single and ready to mingle.

Not that I think Esteban would be any more interested in me sexually now than I thought he was ten minutes ago.

He only approached me because of my last name.

But at least I could look without feeling guilty because of Domingo and my tío .

Domingo's not a bad guy, and I'm fond of him.

I enjoy spending time with him, and we have fun together.

He's not bad in bed either, so it's not like I'm doomed to fuck a troll for the rest of my life or have a sexless marriage.

I just don't love him. We're arguing more because of the impending wedding.

"If you keep looking at the guy, Santi will tell papá ." Catalina's barely speaking louder than a whisper, but it echoes in my ears.

"I could've sworn he was watching me earlier. I don't know why beyond he must know who I am, or he knows who Domingo is." I can't admit to my sister that I spoke to him.

"Yeah, well, he keeps looking at you, too. Don't encourage him."

"He was looking first."

"You can look last. Santi's already noticed."

My sister's right. I know my guard sees everything I do because he's positioned to see everything around me.

He's supposedly reading his book, but he's one of the two most situationally aware men who work for our dad.

Cisco is the other guy, and he's Catalina's guard.

They've watched out for us since we were young teens.

Santi might die for me, but he's loyal to our dad before anyone else.

“Fine. What time does mamá want us to come over?”

Neither of us lives at home. Catalina doesn’t officially live with Matáis, but basically she does.

He’s over at her place most nights, and when he isn’t, he’s sneaking her into his.

Good Catholics that we are, neither she nor I would ever live with a man we aren’t married to.

Everyone turns a blind eye because it would be pointless to pretend they aren’t still doing it like rabbits.

They’re discreet in front of our families, but they’re always touching each other, even if it’s just the back of their hands brushing against each other.

“Six. Dinner’s at seven-thirty.”

That’s half an hour earlier than usual. Our mom hasn’t explained why she wants us to arrive early, but she does.

I suspect she wants Catalina and me to help her in the kitchen.

Everyone in my family—men and women—are excellent cooks.

Mamá and papá made sure of that, but my parents also have an entire household staff.

They only cook when they want to, and it’s rare on nights when we’re going to have anyone outside the immediate family.

They already consider Matáis family, but Domingo isn’t.

That's why it makes little sense to me. Their chef would normally be front and center for appearance's sake.

On nights when their chef prepares dinner, my siblings and I don't have to show up until it's nearly time to eat.

We can even show up fashionably late as long as it's before everyone moves into the dining room.

That's how it is for every Sunday dinner.

If Catalina and I are helping our mom, it usually means one or both of us are in trouble. If we're up to our elbows in making a sauce, we can't run away.

"What did you do?"

We ask each other the same question, which makes us laugh.

"I figured it was you. Matáis's hand was awfully close to your ass when we left church this morning."

My sister frowns and darts her gaze around before she responds. "Ana, I think it's because Domingo complained to papá that you won't set the date. I think mamá 's going to warn us that papá 's announcing something tonight."

"He'd back me into a corner in front of Domingo?"

"In front of his parents."

"They're going to be there, too?" I didn't know that.

“Yeah. I think preparing the larger dishes will be her excuse for wanting our help.”

Fuck my life.

“Like I said, Domingo and I nearly got into it right before you arrived. He definitely left pissed off. He was pushing for a date, too.”

“You can’t keep putting it off.”

“Easy for you to say.” I know I sound pissy.

When I shift my gaze from my sister, I find myself looking at Esteban again.

I’ve been aware of him since the moment I spotted him, and I’m super alert now that he cornered me.

He’s watching me again when our gazes meet.

It’s not the second time, but at least the tenth since I sat back down.

I haven’t let my focus linger on him for more than the time it takes to shift past him, but I know he knows I’m aware of him.

The more I think about an impending wedding, the more Esteban distracts me.

“I know you don’t love him, but you really like him. You’ve said you care about him. Maybe you’ll love him with time.”

“Maybe, but I’ll never be in love with him, even if I can grow to love him.”

“You don’t know that.”

“We’ve been engaged for over a year.”

“But you never really dated.”

“Believe me, I know. We’re friends, but we don’t know each other nearly well enough to get married. This is so antiquated it feels prehistoric. An arranged marriage. I don’t know anyone else stuck like this.”

“You know this still happens in syndicates.”

Cartel? What Cartel? We’ll never admit aloud what our family is. The closest we come is to say our family is in a syndicate, and that’s only among select company. We don’t even say organized crime when we’re in the U.S. or corrupt in Latin America.

“To other people.” I sigh because I sound petulant. “I know I have to just accept it, but I’m scared we won’t be compatible once we live together. We could make each other miserable.”

“Are you scared about more than that?” Catalina watches me like a hawk.

“No. I’m not afraid he’ll hurt me. He knows I’d get on a four-way call with papá , Enrique, and Luis the moment I’m out of his sight.

Even if he took my phone, he knows I’m resourceful enough to talk to them.

He knows he’d die that day. If one of them didn’t kill him, you or I would.

I sense he can be nasty when he doesn’t get what he wants.

I’ve seen hints of it, and it was there today.



Like he was biting his tongue. Once we're married and living together, there won't be much I can do about him fighting dirty with his words.

You know I won't hold back for long. I might try to keep the peace at first, but it'll devolve rapidly. I don't want to live like that."

"You could always keep him too exhausted to put up a fight. You said you enjoy having sex with him."

"I do, but part of the reason I agreed was because I knew inevitably I'd sleep with him once we marry, so why not start sooner? It's not like I can fuck anyone else, so I'd rather fuck him than be a nun."

"And fucking is all it's ever been?"

We're keeping our voices super low, but this isn't the place to have this conversation. We both glance around as we realize how foolish we're being. I nod rather than speak my answer aloud.

"Like your least favorite flavor ice cream?"

I nod again. Vanilla's okay, but I'd rather have anything but coffee flavored ice cream.

My sister has always been my best friend, just like Enrique and Luis have always been each other's.

All four of us are super close, and I could talk about anything with our brothers, but I'd prefer not to discuss our sex lives with them.

Catalina and I know we prefer similar things because we've dated similar guys in the

past and admittedly compared notes.

When she told me next to nothing about Matáis, I knew he was different.

She's left enough clues for me to guess, but she never gives me specifics about him.

She and I suspect our brothers are like us—kinky as fuck. I can't imagine either of them being submissive. Ever. But Catalina and I have been in fluid power exchange relationships before, and we've both been more submissive in others. We've also had strictly vanilla relationships, too.

It's not like we've dated tons of men, but neither of us is by any means close to being virgins.

Our parents just ignore that about all of us.

All four of us were born from immaculate conception, and our children will be too, even if our parents are more affectionate than Catalina and Matáis.

It's obvious how much they love and desire each other.

Discussing my bordering on boring sex life doesn't help after meeting Esteban. I loathe who he is because of who he works for, but I can't ignore how attracted I am to him. It's visceral. And ridiculous. And foolish. And fucking as stupid as it comes. But I can't help it.

"We should get going, so we aren't late." I stand as I speak, and so does Catalina, which signals to our guards we're ready to go.

That sixth sense tells me he's still watching me, and I can't help wishing I could see him again. He approached me for a reason. Said there are things I'd want to hear.

What the fuck does that mean?

## Page 3

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### Chapter Two

Esteban

The woman makes me harder than a fucking steel pipe. I'd love to lay some pipe.

That's a strange American expression I learned in college, but it fits. Fucking hell, I'd make my pipe fit.

I'm worse than a fucking thirteen-year-old boy who can't help but laugh at anything sexual.

I shouldn't be making jokes about my boss's niece.

I also shouldn't have approached her when all I was supposed to do was watch her.

But I couldn't stop myself when I realized I could speak to her without her guard seeing me.

I stepped out of the front door as though I was taking a call and sneaked in the back.

When I returned through the front door, she pretended not to see me walk past her table as her sister arrived, but I'm certain she did.

Luciana Diaz is the last woman in the world I should be attracted to.

Any man in her family would kill me if they knew I've had a hard-on for her since

the moment I spotted her.

That I was way too tempted to back her into the bathroom and fuck her.

I may have known who she was before meeting her today, but she was still a virtual stranger.

I don't fuck strange women. I don't fuck women in restrooms. I don't fuck women I'm assigned to watch. But I want to break all of those rules.

I'm fucking looking death in the face—much closer than I ever have before—if her brothers find out.

Her father isn't one to mess with either, but Enrique and Luis are even more creative than their father with torture.

I know because I've seen what they can do on their own and when they're together. In no way do I want that to be my fate.

It would piss Humberto off for an entirely different reason.

He's not paying me to daydream about his niece, which is what I'm doing right now.

It's a damn good thing I'm alone in the back of this town car.

With the privacy glass up and a twenty-minute drive to Humberto's place, it would be so easy to rub one off.

I keep remembering how good she smelled and how she fought not to react to me calling her chiquita .

What the ever-loving fuck possessed me to say that?

I've called no woman that before. It's never even crossed my mind.

For starters, she's smaller than me, but it's way more than that.

She's a pawn in more games than she knows exists.

The men in her life should protect her, not use her like a chess piece they wish to capture. She deserves protecting.

I've never been into the idea of arranged marriages despite how my parents have hinted way too many times. I don't want to marry a woman because she's merely convenient for my family or me.

I think that's part of what bothers me so much about Luciana's situation.

Her father adores her, and he's practically over the top protective—still shocks me she went to the restroom alone—but he'll use her for the greater good.

I want to say that doesn't sit well with me, but I'm about to do the same thing.

I sit back with my eyes closed, forcing my mind away from Luciana until the car stops and shifts into park. I'm alone, so I don't stifle my aggrieved sigh.

Fucking hell. Here we go again.

I climb out of the backseat and head into the mansion.

The man's taste is gaudier than Liberace.

My grandmother loved him. It's the only reason I know who the dead singer was.

It certainly wasn't for a fashion sense I'd want to copy.

Talk about over the top and gauche. I glance at Humberto's gold-plated banister and want to laugh.

You can see where the veneer's chipping if you look in the right spot.

The old pedazo de mierda loves his furs and jewelry as if he were a washed-up Vegas stripper.

"Esteban?"

"Sí, capitan ."

He wishes he could go by jefe , but he knows that'd push people too far. But if he has his way, he'll have that title before the summer's over.

"What did you learn?"

Demanding fucker.

"She met with her fiancé then her sister. It didn't look like love in paradise between Domingo and her."

That fucker. Fuck him.

Caremonda . Penis face.

I've never liked Domingo Aguilar. The man was born with a silver spoon up his ass.

Our families are not friends.

“What were they talking about?”

“They kept their voices down. Short of sitting at the table with them, there was no way to hear them. But I suspect it was about their wedding. She kept touching her engagement ring, twisting it like she wanted to take it off.”

I would’ve loved nothing more than to see her throw it in his face.

He’s so far beneath her, he’s on the other side of the world.

I don’t know her, but I know enough about him that I wouldn’t wish him on anyone.

He has a temper, and he’s already unfaithful.

He’ll treat her like shit the moment the honeymoon is over.

Probably before that since they’ll be away from her family.

“Did you speak to her?”

“No. There wasn’t a chance.”

“How the fuck are you supposed to seduce her if you don’t talk to her?”

“I never agreed to that.”

“You don’t have to agree. You do what the fuck you’re paid for.”

I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin.



Unlike Lucy—where the hell did that come from—I can look down my nose at the viejo .

I mean that insult far more than she did.

I'm way bigger than he was even in his prime.

I don't need to take a menacing step toward him to make it clear I could snap his neck in half. Killing him won't serve my purpose.

“You know I'm not here for the money.”

“No. You hate my brother more than I do. Seducing his daughter should be the icing on the cake.”

I shrug. “I may hate Josue because he shoved his daughter into bed with the heir to a family I loathe, but I'm not harming any Diaz woman. You may not have limits, but I do.”

That's about the only one I have. No women and no children. I don't wage war against them, and I don't take them prisoner.

“Sure.” Humberto laughs and turns away, expecting me to follow him into his office alone.

“I'm serious, capitan . I'll follow her and watch her, even scare her, but I won't harm her. I still have to look my mother in the eye.”

She'd flay me alive. Any person who doesn't fear their mother more than anyone else is an idiota .

Anyone who can survive the pains of giving birth is someone who understands how to inflict it.

They may never do it, but they know what the body can endure.

How far it can be pushed. And no one is more protective than a mother defending her kids.

If my mother thinks Humberto's corrupted me enough to harm a woman or child, the man will die watching her slit his throat.

I don't doubt for a moment that Lucy would be that kind of mother.

Why the fuck did I think that? What the fuck is wrong with me? I've wanted to fuck women before, but never have they distracted me this much.

Humberto stares at me, then nods. "If I didn't know your mother, I might think you're a pussy. She scares even me."

That's not saying much, considering how many guards he has at his house and how many who go everywhere with him. He fears the fucking wind. He wouldn't have to if he'd leave his older brother alone, but he's so fucking jealous of Josue that he can't help himself.

"Dinner's at seven-thirty, so I'll get there around eight-fifteen. Did you find out who else will be there?" He assumes his family will wait for him, but they won't. He'll have a hissy fit the entire way home that I'll have to listen to.

"Domingo and his parents, Matáis, and Josue's family." I almost wince since Humberto hates being reminded that Josue only considers his wife and children to be his family.

He gives me a disgusted look before sitting behind his desk.

He shuffles some papers as though he has shit I can't see.

It doesn't impress me, and my focus on the garden tells him how little I care.

Lucy might have heard of me as Humberto's enforcer, but I don't need to work for the man.

I don't need to work for anyone. I have more than enough money I earned on my own, never mind what I'll inherit.

Humberto knows that. He truly believes I want to fuck his brother over as much as he does.

I've worked past that. Barely.

"Sounds like wedding bells are already ringing. Josue must plan to announce the date regardless of whether Luciana's ready."

"I read her and her sister's lips well enough to know they talked about him for a bit. She seemed no more excited when she talked about him than she did when she talked to him."

Humberto and his minions don't need to know I'm a fluent lipreader.

My cousin Alicia is two weeks older than me and was born deaf.

Our fathers feared for her since the day they discovered she can't hear.

They worried someone would take advantage of her or abduct her if she didn't hear

them coming.

They appointed me her guardian after I'd already appointed myself.

She and I were best friends growing up until our interests went in different directions and so did our responsibilities.

But when she was learning to read lips, so was I.

We'd already learned sign language together.

We spent hours practicing together as she learned to talk.

People still expect me to be her interpreter, but I let her speak for herself.

I wouldn't want to disappoint her any more than I do my mother, so I have double the reason to never hurt a woman.

I won't tell Humberto or anyone else what I learned about Luciana's sexual preferences.

Realizing she's into kink didn't make my cock calm down.

Just the opposite. Lurid images of tying her up and fucking her while she begged for more keep playing through my mind even as I talk to her tío , my boss.

## Page 4

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“Did you get any hint of when the date might be?”

“No. They never talked about that. Nothing beyond suspecting the announcement tonight.”

“We can’t wait much longer. We’ll have to act sooner than I wanted. Enrique and Luis plan to come home for Josue’s birthday next week. I want Josue dead by the time they land on Thursday.”

Fuck. Talk about accelerating the timeline.

“You better do it while they’re in the air because they’ll start shooting the moment they land if they find out he’s dead before they get here.”

“I’d better? You’d better. I can have anyone watch his daughters. I wanted you to seduce the younger one to get closer to Josue. But if you have to shoot him from a rooftop, then that’s what you’ll do.”

“Even if I used Luciana to get to know Josue, that would take longer than you’re willing to wait.

And even if I got close to him, I could never draw a gun on him without getting shot myself.

I told you I wouldn’t die for you, Humberto.

I’ll work for you, but you know my loyalty is to my family, not you. I’ve never

pretended anything else.”

If we weren’t alone in his office, I’d never say what I’m saying.

He’d have to save face and put me where he believes is my place.

He hates how I don’t bow down to him in private.

It eats at him that I don’t cower, but he wants my skills.

The only people who rival my marksmanship are Enrique and Luis.

I’ve heard their sisters are even better than them, but I haven’t seen them in a gunfight. I’ve seen Enrique and Luis.

Humberto picks up his phone. I know he’s probably opening his game or looking at the screen. He wants me to know I’m dismissed.

“Fine. He’ll go to the airport to meet them. Kill him on the way there.”

I’m fighting not to fidget as the minutes tick away. I just looked at my watch less than two minutes ago, so I know Luis is late. Looking at it again will do nothing but confirm that. It won’t make him show up.

If you fidget, then maybe you won’t pace .

My boat isn’t long enough for me to do that, and I don’t need anyone detecting my movement, despite the lights and engine being off.

I’m bobbing in the circular lake an hour and a half north of Bogotá.

Lake Guatavita sits within a crater that's only fifty acres in size.

My boat's visible from the shore, so any movement could alert someone to my presence, especially since boats are prohibited out here.

One boat alone is suspicious. Two boats tells people they want nothing to do with whatever's happening on the water.

Some may think it's a Cartel meeting. Hopefully, most would believe it's a superstitious offering to the ancient Muisca god.

El Dorado—or the “golden one” as our Spanish conquerors called zipa .

Luis Diaz—if his ass shows up—wouldn't be the one covered in gold out here.

If things go to plan, that'll be Humberto's ass.

Well, maybe not. The legend said the god washes away his gold and emerges from the water.

The last thing we need is Humberto coming back from the dead or any of his jewels floating to the surface to give us away.

I turn my head toward the soft whirl coming from the approaching boat.

The wake it casts laps against mine as I reach for my gun.

I rest it on my lap, waiting to be sure it's friend not foe before I shoot.

I recognize Luis immediately. His frame is broader than mine, but he's leaner.

Too much time already spent in and out of Colombian prisons visiting anyone who forgets they breathe in those cesspits because Josue allows it.

He's not even in his mid-twenties, and he's already earned the nickname el Espíritu Santo —the Holy Spirit—because you know your soul's leaving your body if he's come to see you.

“Hola, amigo .”

Friend. I doubt he'd call me that if he knew I passed my time daydreaming about Luciana while I waited. I'd be praying to God for mercy from el Espíritu Santo if Luis found out. Even God couldn't have enough mercy for me if Enrique found out.

“Hola. ”

“I'm late because Tío Humberto nearly caught me leaving my parents' house. He showed up early.”

“I know. He told me would arrive late to keep your family waiting, but he left his house early, hoping to catch your father in the middle of something without him.”

Humberto is technically Josue's second-in-command because he's usually in the States overseeing their operations in New York, their North American hub.

But he's been down here for an extended—uninvited—vacation.

Enrique's only been out of college a couple years, but he's the brains behind the operation up there.

Luis is his chief enforcer. Humberto talks a big game, but he wants his brother dead because he knows Enrique will soon oust him.



No one wants to do business with Humberto when they can deal with Enrique.

Humberto wants Josue dead for the title, the power, and the money he assumes is rightfully his as Josue's brother. Never mind Enrique's always been the heir. No one will pledge loyalty to Humberto over Enrique. At least, no one who wants to live long enough to pledge anything.

"He nearly succeeded. I stayed longer than I should have, but I wanted time with Cat and Ana. Papá 's letting Ana pick the date, but he announced the wedding will be before the summer's over."

It's mid-June now.

"He's putting her back up against the wall. Will she cooperate?"

"Sí . But it won't be pretty in private."

"She really doesn't want to marry him?"

"She doesn't like to be forced into anything.

I think she cares about him, and who knows, maybe she'll grow to love him like I love my wife.

But backing her into a corner will do him no favors regardless of how she feels about Domingo.

She could be head over heels for him, but she still wouldn't appreciate it.

She's already marrying him for our family's sake. She doesn't care to be reminded."

Luis's still a newlywed. He barely knew Margherita when they married, but they're in love now.

Margherita's father refused to consider Enrique.

He didn't want his daughter to be a young widow since Enrique's automatically a bigger target as the heir.

Little did he know what Luis's position would become.

He's in far more danger every time he comes down here since he deals with the dregs of society in the roughest prisons.

These aren't American country club, white-collar crimes prisons.

These are the most brutal cartels' homes, and Luis is usually an uninvited guest.

"Things are moving fast, Luis. Knowing your sister's wedding is actually happening is making him panic.

He doesn't want that alliance to go through.

He's putting the hit on your father for Thursday while you and Enrique fly down here.

I warned him what would happen if you found out or if it happened before you're in the air. He's confident he can pull it off."

Luis watches me and appears to trust me about as much as his sister does.

But he knows I never lie to Enrique or him.

I've had plenty of opportunities to, but I never have.

Enrique and I were freshman roommates and soccer teammates throughout college.

I met Luis while he was still at boarding school in the States.

My family runs the city of Medellín and once were rivals to Luis and Enrique's.

Rather than lose everything, my great-grandfather decided it was better to stay in his lane and control all the poppy farms in Colombia.

He sold the harvests to los Diaz —or the Diazes as Americans would say—rather than die with nothing.

My grandfather and now my father agree with that wisdom. I do, too.

If I'd wanted to prove my huevos are bigger than Enrique's or Luis's, I could've killed Enrique a thousand times over in the year we lived together.

He could've done the same to me. Instead, we became close friends.

I'll never take Luis's place, and I've never wanted to.

Enrique and Luis know Enrique can't take Alicia's.

Someone has to have a conscience for me.

“How does he plan to do it?”

“By using me. He wanted me to seduce Luciana—easy.” I put my hands up.

“I’m not going to. I said he wanted me to, but I don’t wage my wars through women.

He thought that would get me close to your father.

I reminded him it would take longer than he’s willing to wait and that I’d die in the process.

I also reminded him my loyalty is to my family not him, so I won’t risk that. He wants me to snipe him.”

I know Luis saw the gun on my lap. I can see his. Neither of us has reached for ours, and I’m bold enough to cross my arms and lean back. It’s a sign of good faith. I might talk about killing his father, but I won’t. That’s not why Enrique planted me in Humberto’s inner circle.

“My mom and sisters are supposed to be with my dad all day Thursday. Then they’re coming to the airport to meet Enrique and me.”

“Are you going to tell your father?”

“Of course. My mom and sisters can’t be anywhere near him that day just in case.”

I sigh as I ease my hand down to my gun. Luis’s eyes narrow for a moment as I holster the weapon behind my back and stand.

“I’ll tell carechimba that my father expects me home for the weekend.

He can think I went to Medellín, but I’ll stay in Bogotá.

Whoever he plans to send in my place won’t make it past his front door.

But I need your promise that if Humberto looks in my direction, you'll back me up.

"Vagina face suits him as much as caremonda —penis face.

"Of course we will." He sounds duly insulted.

"Fine. I'll call Humberto tonight and tell him. I'll make sure my wire taps capture who he picks in my place. The guy'll be dead before he can see daylight on Thursday."

"Keep an eye on my sisters. I don't trust my tío not to change his mind and target them to get my father to bend."

"All right."

Believe me, I'll be watching Luciana .

### Chapter Three

Luciana

“If that’s what you want.”

I have no idea what Domingo just asked me.

I couldn’t care less. He’s been going on about the wedding for the past two days.

I swear he’s a fucking bridezilla. Ever since papá reassured Domingo and his parents that the wedding would be before the end of the summer, Domingo’s had a one-track mind.

He’s been calling and texting, asking me about this arrangement or that.

I feel like telling him to just do whatever he wants since he gives a damn, and I don’t.

I sat there through Sunday dinner, waiting for papá to announce what I assumed he would.

But I still struggled not to flinch when he declared the wedding would be within the next three months.

It melted the high I was on from Luis’s surprise visit— mamá ’ s reason to arrive early.

It eradicated all the happiness of getting to spend an hour with my big brother.

He gets how much I'm dreading an arranged marriage since he has one.

But he also gets how different our situations are and that I'll never love Domingo the way he does Margherita. They're fucking soulmates.

Papá 's never said it, but I'm certain he knew Luis and Margherita were destined for each other.

The alliance to get Margherita's father to stop challenging him was just the excuse.

I know mamá researched everything there was to ever know about the woman.

Then she agreed to papá suggesting the marriage to Margherita's father.

I believe they knew my brother and sister-in-law were perfect from the moment mamá heard about her at a cocktail party Margherita's parents threw.

I know papá dug into Domingo's background just as thoroughly, but neither he nor mamá seem as excited as they were for Luis.

They pretend well, but I see through it.

“ Ana .”

Mierda .

Shit.

“Sorry. I was just remembering Luis and Margherita's wedding. I loved the flowers

she carried. I was trying to remember everything that was in her bouquet.”

I lie like it’s my job. Considering I’m getting into commercial real estate, I’d say I’m well prepared.

“How many men will your tío bring with him?”

That question rattles me.

“Uh...”

I’m certain I saw Esteban earlier today.

I thought I saw him yesterday. I was thinking about him before my mind wandered to Luis and Margherita.

He’s why I didn’t hear half of what Domingo’s said so far and why I just keep smiling and nodding.

I dreamed about him Sunday night and last night.

They were the most Rated X dreams I’ve ever had.

I woke up during both nights on the edge of coming.

I’m a stomach sleeper, so I ground my pussy against my mattress, hoping to get myself off while keeping the dream going.

It didn’t work, so I wound up rolling over and getting myself off with my vibrator I keep under my bed.



Easy to reach. Domingo travels for work, so sometimes I feel like getting off, and he's not in town.

Sometimes I don't want to deal with him, but I want an orgasm.

Sometimes he just doesn't do the trick, so I slip into my living room to do it once he's asleep.

I keep the damn thing on the charger twenty-four seven.

"Can you at least name some of the men he'll bring?" Domingo sounds annoyed, like I should know who works for my tío .

"No. He has men in New York I've never heard of or met. He has men down here, but they're mostly my dad's and on loan to tío . Anyone working directly for him isn't someone I want to know." Except for Esteban .

Domingo watches me before shooting me a smile that's probably supposed to be understanding, but it always makes me feel belittled.

Like he's tolerating a child, not a man agreeing with his future wife.

Ever since Sunday night, Domingo's flaws stand out more.

Things that've bothered me, but I've pushed aside.

Things that now make me question what life would be like with him.

Doubts are reverberating in my head, and it's almost deafening.

The only time I'm not thinking them is when I'm thinking about that man .

The one I'm certain just entered the restaurant with three other guys I've seen around my tío .

I dart my gaze to the door, judging how many steps it would take to get me outside.

Looking for anything that can keep me out of their sight.

It's not Esteban I want to hide from. It's the other men.

They're guys who've always made me nervous.

I don't like the way they look at Catalina and me.

"Domingo, can we get the check and go?"

"Ready to go home? My place or yours?"

His gaze slides over me, and I know he thinks I want to leave so we can go to bed.

It would be a distraction, but it does nothing to excite me.

When my gaze locks with Esteban's, the thought pops into my head that I could picture him while I fuck Domingo.

The dreams flood back to me, and that excites me.

But the moment I look back at Domingo, the flame's extinguished. Completely snuffed out.

"I'm exhausted. I didn't sleep well, so I started my swim early. I doubled the distance I usually do, so I'm wiped now. I really just want to pass out till morning."

My response displeases him, but he hides it—a moment too late because I saw the flash of anger.

I turned him down Sunday night and last night.

I'm going to have to relent to avoid an argument, and that blows.

I don't want to be in a relationship where I have to put out to pacify or placate my husband.

It feels like giving in to keep the peace.

He signals the waitress and reaches for his wallet.

We got into our first argument when I offered to pay for our fifth date.

We were pretty much already engaged, but we were doing our best to get to know each other like a normal couple.

I felt bad that he was always spending, and I was always taking.

I tried to explain that, but I insulted him.

He claimed I believed he wasn't wealthy enough to support us.

That I believed he couldn't afford nice things for me.

He refused to believe I did it because I was trying to be nice and show that I was into him.

"I'm going to run to the restroom."

I push back my chair before he can say anything and grab my purse. If this were a regular shitty date, it might tempt me to slip out the backdoor and go to my sister's. But I know Matáis is already over there, and I can't bolt from my fiancé.

"You aren't having fun, chiquita ."

I freeze as the voice behind me reaches my ears. Hands grip my waist and propel me forward.

"We can't talk here. Someone—namely your fiancé—will see us."

"Then you shouldn't be touching me."

"But I am, and you aren't trying to stop me. And don't lie and say you're scared. I might infuriate you, but I don't intimidate you."

I don't fight him as he steers me into a storage room the next door down from the ladies' room. He leaves the door ajar, showing me he's not trapping me in here. If I scream, someone will hear me. If I get to the door, I can open it wide enough to leave.

"What do you want?"

"Tell me what you see in him."

"What?"

"Tell me why you agreed to the marriage. Your father might have arranged it, but he doesn't strike me as a man who'd force you to be miserable for the rest of your life. You consented at some point. What do you see in Domingo Aguilar that makes you want to spend your life with him?"

I stare at Esteban and blink. He must think I look like a beached trout. Eyes and mouth wide open while struggling to breathe.

“He’s charming, intelligent, determined, hardworking, polite.”

“You described a labrador not a future husband.”

“You just don’t recognize those words because no one’s used them to describe you.”

“You lie better than most, Lucy. But you don’t lie well to me. You weren’t describing him.”

“Who was I describing? One of my brothers?”

He laughs. “Hardly. They are those things, but you wouldn’t be looking at me the way you are if you were thinking about them.”

“How am I looking at you?”

“Like you want me to do this.”

His arm wraps around my waist and pulls me against him. I wait for the kiss, but it doesn’t come. I lift my gaze to his and realize he’s waiting for permission. I part my lips and tilt my head back. He accepts the offer.

His kiss is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. It’s like I’m floating toward the ceiling, watching what’s happening below me. I feel his lips and taste his tongue. It’s so unbelievable he’s kissing me that I almost can’t accept it’s reality.

I’m kissing him back as I lean into him. I know I should push away from him. I should scream. I should run. I should knee him in the dick. That’s the last thing I

want to do to his cock. Instead, I press against him, relishing the feel of how hard he is for me.

“One day, chiquita , we won’t be in a storeroom, and your fiancé won’t be sitting at a table waiting for you.

Your fiancé’ll have your legs wrapped around his waist while he fucks you.

I’ll be deep inside that tight, wet cunt as I make you come.

When I finally let you stand, you’ll feel my cum dripping along your thigh.

I won’t insist you keep all of it inside your pretty little pussy because you’ll already be carrying our child. ”

“Fuck.”

He takes that as a cue to kiss me again. I’ve lost my fucking mind. I’m cheating on my fiancé who thinks I’m in the restroom. I’m kissing a man who works for my tío , who’s probably at his house plotting to kill my father.

That jolts me back to reality right snappy.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

I push away and take several steps back. I run my hands over my pants and around my waist to straighten my shirt. I rake my fingers through my hair, which I hadn't realized he fisted until he had to let go as I shifted from his reach.

"You think you're going to knock me up, then force me to marry you? Consider this the only chance you'll ever have to touch me. It was a mistake I won't make twice."

"I've never forced a woman to do anything, and I definitely won't have to force you to marry me."

"You arrogant bastard."

"When's the last time you kissed Domingo like that? ... Thought so."

I hesitated a moment too long.

"Domingo is none of your business. I'm leaving."

"Because you assume you know the type of man I am."

"Because I'm marrying someone else in a few weeks."

That makes me want to vomit.

I push against Esteban's chest as he pulls me against him again. It's half-hearted at best.

“Did you dream about me the last two nights like I’ve dreamed about you? Are you going home to fuck him while you picture me?”

“You are a twisted, arrogant bastard.”

“That’s not a no.”

“You planning to fuck some bitch while thinking of me?”

“Definitely not.”

I raise my foot to stomp on his foot.

Cabrón . Asshole.

“Lucy, I’m not fucking anyone who isn’t you.”

His declaration surprises even him. We stare at each other.

“I can’t do this, Esteban. It’s so fucking wrong. I have to go.”

“Purely because Domingo is waiting for you?”

“What I said earlier about Domingo is true. He’s all of those things, but most importantly, he’s loyal to my father. That matters more to me than anything.”

“That’s very valiant of you, but his loyalty won’t make your happy five, ten, fifty years from now.”

“My happiness doesn’t matter to you.”



“For reasons I haven’t figured out, it does.”

“I’m not making an observation.”

He grins, and it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Are you commanding me, chiquita ?”

“Stop calling me that. Why do you call me that?”

“Commanding and demanding. I usually don’t find those so alluring, but I’ll make an exception for you.”

“ Cabrón .”

“Such a dirty mouth. I can think of something to wash it out with.”

I move faster than he expects. I stomp on his foot, and my elbow goes to his sternum as I twist. I know I can’t easily punch him in the face or even the throat, so I go for his diaphragm instead.

My brothers taught me that. I take one step toward the door before Esteban hauls me back against him.

His cock wedged between my ass and his breath against my ear make me shiver again.

“A dirty mouth and a dirty mind. Soap, chica .”

“You say that now. We both know what you meant before.”

“You jumped to that conclusion, which tells me you’re thinking about us.”

“There’s no us. You work for my tío . That makes you utterly despicable. Maybe you’d be good for a quick fuck now that I know you kiss like a porn star, but you’ll never prove it because you’ll never touch me again.”

“You only know what you’ve heard about me, Lucy. Make sure you heard right before you assume you know me.”

He lets me go and slips out of the room like he was never in here. Like we weren’t practically mauling each other. Like I didn’t practically commit adultery.

What the fuck have you done?!

I’ve never cheated on any guy before. Never. Not even come close to it, even when I’ve found other men attractive. Not even when I’ve been too drunk to make good decisions.

I want to regret it. I know I should regret it.

But I don’t.

That makes me a horrible, horrible person.

I’m in a committed relationship. I’m marrying Domingo in like six or seven weeks, and I just had another man’s tongue down my throat. As though that isn’t bad enough, I liked it. I’d do it again if not for Domingo and my tío .

Esteban, Esteban wherefore art thou Esteban?

Why does he have to be him? Why can’t he be someone—anyone—besides a man

who works for Tío Humberto?

I fish around in my purse for my phone before pulling up my contacts and hitting the second one.

“Ana? Is everything okay?”

“Enrique, what do you know about Esteban Cardenas?”

I can’t believe I just blurted that out.

Why isn’t he answering me immediately? I’m certain he has to know who he is.

“How do you know Esteban, Ana?”

“Don’t answer me with a question. You’re trying to give yourself time to come up with a lie. Tell me the truth. What do you know about him?”

“His family is from Medellín. They control the poppy fields up there. His family works with ours.”

“ Papá or Tío Humberto?”

“ Papá .”

“Then why have I heard his name linked to our tío ? Why did he enter the restaurant I’m in with three of tío’s men?”

“He isn’t his father. He chooses who he works for.”

My brother’s being purposely vague. It means he knows a shit ton more than he’ll tell

me. I assumed he would, but this is a sign there's nothing good that can come of this conversation.

“Did something happen with him, Ana? Did he scare you?”

“No.” That's the truth.

“Did Domingo do something, and Esteban stepped in at the restaurant?”

“What? No. Why would you think that?”

“Tell me the truth, Ana. I know papá 's asked you this, but I don't believe you've told him the truth. Does Domingo have a temper?”

“He's never hurt me, Kiko.”

I've used that nickname for my older brother since I started to talk but couldn't say Enrique.

“That isn't what I asked. I know he won't hurt you. You'd stab him or shoot him if he did. But does he have a temper? Will he try to intimidate you? Scare you?”

“You're avoiding the reason I called.”

“No, I'm not. I want to know if the real reason is because Domingo did something.”

“How do you know I'm with Domingo? I only said I was in a restaurant. I didn't say who with.”

“You think I haven't pulled up your tracker and Domingo's? You call me at nearly eleven at night asking me about an enforcer, and you don't think I looked up where

you are and where your fiancé is? Did Esteban do something, and Domingo didn't protect you? I'll ki?—"

"No. Nothing like that at all. Stop, Kiko. Your imagination is running away with you. It made me nervous to see Paco, Chuy, and Cokie walk into a restaurant with him."

Francisco, Jesus, and Jorge Hierro are men Enrique and Luis can't stand.

The three brothers used to pick fights with mine until Enrique put Paco in the hospital for nearly a month with a stab wound to his kidneys.

Chuy thought to defend his older brother and went after Luis, not knowing Cokie would try to attack me while Luis and I headed to tennis courts in our neighborhood.

Luis lost his mind when he saw Cokie reach for me.

He was half an inch from slicing Chuy's jugular and didn't finish the kill, so he could get to me.

Cokie discovered my brothers weren't the only ones who carried knives.

He's legally blind in his right eye because I almost skewered it.

I only had time to nick it before Luis launched himself at Cokie.

"Leave now, Ana. I don't care if you and Domingo haven't finished dinner. I don't want you around the Hierro brothers."

"I know. But should I fear Esteban because he's with them? I've seen him around a few times recently, but he wasn't with any of tío's men. He is tonight."

“No. You don’t know Esteban, but I do. He won’t touch my sisters.”

I suck my lips in as I look over my shoulder at where Esteban and I stood as we practically dry humped each other.

“If you say so.”

“Ana—”

“Yeah?”

My brother rarely pauses when he’s speaking. If he has something to say, he’s already thought it through.

“If anything happens, you can trust Esteban. He’s the only man anywhere near Tío Humberto that you can.”

“What do you mean? Why are you telling me that? Kiko, is something going to happen?”

“No. I know how things appear, but you know in our world it’s never that simple. Esteban and Matáis are the only men outside our family I trust completely.”

What the fuck? He didn’t say Domingo.

“Why are you letting me marry a man you don’t trust?”

“Luciana?”

How much did Domingo hear?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

### Chapter Four

Esteban

“My sister asked about you.”

I glance over at Enrique as I steer my boat into the center of Lake Guatavita for the second time in a week.

I stepped out of the restaurant restroom as Lucy walked past me.

I ducked in there to text Enrique what I learned from the Hierro brothers.

I got a name. I didn't plan a hookup. I knew they'd notice her if she went back out to Domingo, and that was the last thing I wanted.

The moment I touched her, I was done for.

She felt so damn right as I guided her to that storeroom. Then the way she felt against me. The way she tasted. The way?—

For fuck's sake. You're going to get hard in front of the woman's brothers. How the fuck will you explain that without them thinking you're a perve toward her or hot for one of them?

“I talked to her to keep her away from Paco, Chuy, and Cokie. I realized they'd spot her as she left the restroom since I'd gone in that direction to text you.

I walked back into the dining area, looking like I was on the phone.

I ended a pretend call and kept them distracted while she went back to Domingo.

The brothers didn't notice them until they walked past the window on the way to Domingo's car. "

Luis stares at me for a moment before he speaks. "Did they say anything about her?"

"No. I didn't give them a chance to."

"Grrmmmpphrrr."

Enrique, Luis, and I look down at the man bound and gagged on the deck.

Luis kicks him in the ribs, but Enrique and I ignore his garbled sound.

We're near the center of the lake, and it's overcast, so there are next to no stars shining.

It's far darker than it was the other night.

I lower the anchor, then turn off the engine.

Enrique grabs the man's hair and pulls him to his feet.

He brings the tip of his blade to the corner of the guy's right eye and trails it down his cheek, leaving a faint line but not breaking the skin.

The man pisses himself when Enrique slips the knife beneath the gag.



Enrique, Luis, and I laugh as Enrique cuts the gag in one slice.

“Now I’m going to have to scrub the fucking deck. I should make you do it before I keelhaul you.”

I’ll have to scrub more than just piss after we’re done with him. Enrique cuts through the zip ties securing the guy’s hands behind his back. Luis pulls a mini machete from his belt, and Enrique pushes our captive’s hands onto the boat’s rail.

“You like to wear a lot of jewelry. Perhaps we shall offer them as sacrifices to El Dorado .”

Luis raises his knife as he speaks. He’s about to bring it down over the man’s left pinky when he squeals and tries to pull away. All that does is make him back into my pistol’s muzzle.

“We can’t leave without offering something to Chie. The water goddess won’t be ignored.” I push him forward until Enrique and Luis each have a hand pressed against the boat.

This guy—Miguel Rojas—is descended from the ancient Muisca people who inhabited this area. This lake is one of their most sacred spots. I’m not superstitious like Miguel, but I don’t like to linger here if I can help it. We’re using his fear to our advantage.

“Tell us what we want to know, and all you’ll lose are your rings, bracelets, and necklaces. Don’t answer, and I’ll cut off your fingers, your hands, and then your neck to make our offerings. Your jewels will sink to the bottom just like the parts of you I lop off.” Luis lifts the machete again.

“No! No! I’ll talk. I’ll give the offering, and I’ll talk.”

Whether it's a healthy fear of the deity or us, the man's made his first good choice since getting into bed with Humberto.

"What's Humberto planning?"

Miguel looks at Enrique as he mulls over what to say.

Luis presses the blade against his pinky, and Miguel trembles.

He's weak, but at least that means we won't be out here long.

The whole only-one-boat-out-here thing is making me anxious.

No boats are supposed to be on the lake, and the few that come on here are usually little more than rafts or canoes.

It's why this is a good place to meet Enrique and Luis.

No one's going to overhear us. But none of us love being on sacred water.

We might not believe in the goddess Chie because we're all lapsed Catholics, but we have a healthy fear of desecrating any faith.

"He thinks he's—" Miguel tilts his head toward me and looks over his shoulder.

"—at home with his parents in Medellín. Humberto wanted him—" He jerks his head toward me this time.

"—to kill your father, but now he's ordered me to do it.

I'm supposed to be at the airport, hiding just outside the hangar when your family

arrives to meet you.

Humberto knows el jefe won't let the senora or señoritas out of the car before him.

I'm to shoot him the moment he turns toward the plane as it taxis into the hangar.

I have a driver to go with me to get me out of there. ”

“He's assuming our father gets out of the car before the plane enters the hangar. What if he waits until Luis and I get off the plane?”

Miguel's already pissed himself. Now he looks like he's going to shit himself.

“I'm to shoot all three of you.”

“You're willing to die for our tío ?” Luis sounds skeptical.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Yes.” Enrique's quick to answer, which makes Miguel shift his attention away from the machete pressing against his finger.

“Is it a choice of how I die? I don't want to be keelhailed. Just cut my head off instead. I can't hold my breath that long.”

I roll my eyes. For starters, I'm not keelhauling him in this lake.

I still have limits beside not harming women and children, and we're already pushing them being out here to torture the fucker.

My boat isn't even wide enough to do more than keep him under water for thirty

seconds.

I can't do it lengthwise because of the outboard engines.

The worst that would happen is he gets some water up his nose.

“You work for me now. You're going to make your home in la alcantarilla .”

The sewer. It's the worst prison in Bogotá.

The most hardened criminals go there. If it weren't for the Diaz family, it would be a survival of the fittest in there.

Fucking Lord of the Flies . Josue ensures the rival gangs understand they keep their turf wars within the prison because he allows it.

Any of them step out of line, and he sends Luis in to remind them that what Josue gives, he can take away.

Los Diaz run contraband through there. They make a shit ton manipulating guards to get the prisoners addicted, then keeping them hooked, but not dead. They also monopolize all sales and distribution of cell phones and cigarettes into the prison. Those are the two most coveted items besides drugs.

To outsiders, it sounds like nothing but a massive criminal operation.

There's no doubt it is, but it also keeps the peace.

When there's open hostility in the prisons, then there's open hostility in the streets.

With the Diaz family—with Josue—in command, there's a balance of power among

the gangs that ensures innocent people aren't caught in the crossfire.

With the tight rein Josue keeps on the prisons throughout Latin America, no one dares test his reach.

No one but his maldito pedazo de mierda —motherfucking piece of shit—brother.

“I won't survive la alcantarilla !” Miguel looks ready to piss and shit himself while puking over the edge.

“You better figure out how to. When I say jump, you'll beg to know how high.

When I say grovel, you'll crawl on your belly to lie beneath my boots.

When I tell you to take it up the ass, you'll spread your cheeks.

You'll smuggle whatever the fuck I want into that jail and do it with a motherfucking smile.

If you don't, Luis'll toss you into the yard like a piece of steak to a lion pride.

They'll tear you apart while you're still breathing.

Do you have any idea how painful it is to be disemboweled? ”

“Fine. Fine. I'll do it.”

Nothing about Enrique's tone or expression makes any of us think he's exaggerating.

Luis won't think twice about following that order since the man cowering before us was prepared to attempt to kill their father.

There's no way he would succeed, but he'd try.

It's more convenient to have him on the inside than in a pool of blood in the hangar where their mother and sisters could see or get caught in crossfire.

"Check in tomorrow at seven a.m. Don't make me wait."

Enrique speaks as though Miguel's going to a hotel not a penitentiary.

Luis draws back his fist and slams it into Miguel's temple.

The man crumples to the deck. He won't wake before Enrique and Luis's men dump him outside the jail when we get back into the city.

We remain silent as we head back to shore.

I swab the deck and wipe the rails to remove any traces of us.

The brothers help me attach my boat to the trailer and wait for me as I tow it out of the water.

I have a place a few miles away where I store it alongside their boat.

"We may have ended that threat, but tío won't take the hint. He needs to go." Enrique's gaze bores into me as he speaks.

"I know." He wants me to do to Humberto what Humberto wanted me to do to Josue.

The brothers turn toward their armored SUV as I walk to my truck. It's far bigger than most vehicles on the roads here, so it sticks out. I only drive it when I have to haul something. Usually, I stick with a less conspicuous sports car.

“If anything goes wrong—if you can’t finish the job or something comes up, I’m trusting Matáis to get Catalina to safety, and I’m trusting you to do the same for Luciana. Mamá knows what to do. Fail me, and there’ll be no forgiveness.”

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I nod. I'm not about to tell Enrique—or Luis, for that matter—just how far I'll go to protect Lucy. They'll want to know why, and I'm not prepared to tell them I'll kill Domingo and marry their sister if the fucker doesn't step aside soon.

Am I stalking her?

Some people would say yes.

I've followed Luciana whenever I can for the past week.

Most of the time I've been invisible, but I've found reasons to show up in her path.

We happened to go running along the same trail.

We happened to be at the same grocery store.

We happened to be at the same bookstore.

That's when I let her see me. Each time I kept the encounter brief.

Little more than a smile, a greeting, and a nod because she had guards with her.

I don't need any of them questioning me, but I made sure I'm on her mind nearly as much as she's on mine.

I've also watched her inconspicuously. With everything escalating and the increased danger around her father, I'm unwilling to trust her safety entirely to other men.



It's ridiculous since these men have protected the Diaz family for years—decades in some cases.

I know it's completely irrational, but now that I've found Lucy, I won't risk losing her.

If she glared at me in anger or disgust, then maybe I wouldn't be so insistent upon my silent mission.

But heat flares between us when our gazes meet.

I'm certain I'm not imagining it. At the grocery store, I wandered over and helped her reach a box of cereal from the top shelf.

One of her guards could've—should've—helped, but none did.

Her fingers brushed my fingers as I handed it to her.

She didn't have to do it, but she wanted to touch me.

I nearly hefted her over my shoulder and made off with her.

Right now, I'm watching her slip into the backdoor of an apartment building in a quiet suburb.

It's not where she lives, but it's somewhere she's visited before.

I'm certain of that since she knows where to look when she sweeps her gaze around the area.

I also know where to hide since this isn't my first time here.

She's visiting Luis, who's back yet again.

The guy is a fucking yo-yo. He and Enrique were here three days ago for their father's birthday.

It went off without a problem since we locked Miguel in a warehouse storage room for a few hours when we got back to Bogotá after our brief cruise on the lake.

Then we dumped him outside the prison just before dawn.

Luis and Enrique went back to New York, but Luis arrived here this morning.

I'm dying to know what they're talking about, but I can't follow her in. I refuse to bug her place, her car, or her purse. I might be her shadow, but I won't violate every bit of her privacy. She'd never forgive me for that, which would make wooing her impossible.

There's just something about her.

Something that feels so right.

Not just physically, but far more. The way she pushes back against what I say.

Most people wouldn't dare. Nothing about me invites a discussion when I give an order.

She has no such reservations about disagreeing with me.

I know from Enrique how intelligent she is and driven.

I respect her dedication to her family and her willingness to sacrifice.

I admire her courage to accept a fate she doesn't want.

Her doubts about Domingo are clear whenever she talks about him, even if most people can't see what's so obvious to me.

I know I'm at an advantage because I know far more about her than she does me. Before meeting her, the things Enrique told me about his sisters were only mildly interesting. I didn't give them much thought, but he's always been proud whenever he talks about Catalina and Lucy. Now I understand why.

Luis'll kill me if he discovers I'm surveilling them because neither he nor Enrique ordered me to watch Lucy.

However, Enrique told me to protect her if anything goes wrong.

How can I do that if I don't know where she is or how to get to her?

I doubt that'll be strong enough reasoning if they discover what I'm doing, but I think it's justified.

If I stick with that and don't deviate if they question me, then maybe they'll believe me.

Rationalizing.

If I can convince myself, then maybe I can convince others.

Since I can't even explain to myself my compulsion to see her and watch her, I know I'm nothing more than a fucking stalker.

I keep going around and around in my head as I wait.

There's plenty I could and should do right now.

Things that would keep my mind off Lucy.

Instead, I'm sitting in my car, waiting.

I watch Lucy and Luis leave the apartment together and get into a car Luis drives.

Finally, I can concentrate on something besides my spiraling thoughts.

I let them get ahead of me before I pull out.

I know Luis'll spot me in an instant if I'm not careful.

I'm not in my usual car, which isn't flashy, but it's definitely nicer than most cars on the streets.

I'm in the inconspicuous one that blends in.

It looks like a run of the mill car in Bogotá.

I stay five car lengths behind them, sometimes six.

But I make sure I don't lose sight of them.

They pull up to the gate of a country club I belong to.

Motherfucker. Now this car will stick out.

There's no way I can enter with this vehicle.

I look around and find street parking a block away.

It'll raise some eyebrows, but I have no other choice than to walk up to the gate.

I can't wait around for one of my guys to bring my car or chauffeur me inside.

A taxi is not something I can do, even if they're so much more convenient than having to find street parking.

“Hola, Señor Cardenas. ”

“Hola, Armando .”

I know the guy since he's on my family's payroll. He's an informant, so he won't think twice about me showing up in a less than conventional style. He'll understand something's going on, but he won't ask what.

I wander into the clubhouse and look around. It takes less than a heartbeat for me to spy Lucy in the restaurant with Luis.

Fuck.

I can't just wander over and join them. Sitting alone without my laptop is too conspicuous. I should've brought the damn thing with me since that's my usual cover.

“Espanol!”

I swing my gaze to two guys I know, and I force myself not to cringe at how loud the guy was. Lucy immediately looks in my direction, the surprise obvious on her face before she catches herself. Luis is more discreet as our gazes meet. I know he'll

watch me from the corner of his eye.

The only upside to Pedro Gonzalez recognizing me is that he and his cousin are sitting at the table next to Luis and Lucy, and the only seat available is close to Lucy. There's a party of five that must have taken the fourth seat, so I have no choice as I weave my way through the tables.

Both men stand to shake my hand before I sit.

The staff must have shifted this table to accommodate the larger party next to us because I nearly bump into Lucy as I pull my chair out.

I barely take a breath before Pedro launches into a story about some house party he went to in Monte Carlo last week.

I couldn't give a shit, but I nod as he speaks.

I won't get a word in edgewise, so I don't bother trying.

Instead, I strain to hear Luis speaking.

"Ana, you need to set the date. The sooner you're married, the sooner you'll get out of Bogotá for a few weeks."

"You still haven't told me why I need to travel. More specifically, you haven't told me why my travel needs to be on my honeymoon."

"You'll be safer once you're an Aguilar."

"I will never not be a Diaz. You know that. I'll be Luciana Aguilar Diaz."

“Adding Domingo’s family name will shelter you as much as having him at your side will.”

I watch them from the corner of my eye as I force my hands not to curl into fists.

“I’d be safer in New York with you and Kiko.”

“Then convince Domingo to spend more time at his place up there.”

“Convince him? He’s not exactly giving into my wishes these days.”

What the fuck does that mean?

“He would if you’d set the damn date.” Luis’s voice remains calm in case anyone can overhear him, but I sense his impatience with his little sister.

“If you think adding him to the family is such a benefit, you marry him. Oh, wait. That’s right. You love your wife and are blissfully married.”

“I didn’t love her when we married. I didn’t even know her, but I gave her a chance.”

“Maybe I could be blissful if I didn’t know him.

Blissfully ignorant. But I do, and I will never love him.

Luis, I can live with that. I don’t have to love or be loved in my marriage, though I’d prefer it.

There’s just something that’s making me drag my feet.

I don’t know what it is, but something keeps telling me this is a huge mistake. That

voice is even louder than ever.”

Lucy shifts in her seat, and it brings her closer to me. Does she know I can hear them? Is it a signal? Wishful thinking.

“What did Domingo do?” Now there’s an edge to Luis’s voice.

“Nothing. It’s just a feeling I have. It’s not like I’m baiting him, but the more impatient he’s growing, the more I’m seeing hints of a man I don’t know that I can live with.”

“Are you afraid?”

I want to know the answer to that question. It’ll determine whether Domingo dies tonight.

“No.” Lucy’s quick to answer, and it makes me wonder if she’s covering up something.

“I barely got the question out before you answered. You don’t want to marry him, yet you defend him. Or are you hiding something, Ana?”

“I don’t want to cause trouble where there is none. I just think he’ll become insufferable. We’ve been making plans, and he never asks what I want. He just tells me how things will be for the ceremony and the reception.”

“He probably knows if he doesn’t do it, no one will. You definitely haven’t taken the initiative.”

I pretend to look for the waiter, but it allows me to see both of them.



Pedro's still yapping about God only knows what, but he's keeping his brother entertained.

I can focus on Lucy and Luis as I gesture for the server.

They pause the conversation as the waiter passes them, and there's a moment where I can't hear them as I order.

"Fine. Papá wants the wedding in six weeks. I'll tell Domingo to book the church for that Saturday."

"Sooner if it's available."

"Luis, what the hell is going on? I'm telling you I have doubts, and you want me to run down the aisle even faster."

"I already explained. You'll be safer."

I can see Luis give his younger sister a pointed look, and she sits back in her chair.

As I hand the waiter my menu after the others order, I see her mouth "Humberto." I see enough of Luis's profile to observe him cock an eyebrow.

Lucy's gaze darts around the restaurant, starting away from me.

She looks at me, and I know she's aware I can hear everything.

I assume Luis knows too. She doesn't linger over me, her attention back on her brother.

"Fine. I'll find out how soon Domingo can book the church.

It won't matter that the invitations are last minute.

Anyone who receives one to the reception will drop their plans to see if the jefe's younger daughter is knocked up and showing yet.

That's what they'll all assume if we rush the event.

Eloping would only make it worse, and there's no way papá or Domingo's father would accept missing the chance to flaunt their wealth and power.

The ceremony is a formality. The reception proves we're married. ”

The idea she might carry another man's child makes me want to smash everything in sight.

Domingo's parents will pressure her since a child will truly bind the families, and they need the alliance more than Josue.

It'll be good for Josue's business, but it'll keep Domingo's family from extinction.

That's what they're on the verge of if they don't resolve things with the jefe de jefes .

Hopefully, Josue will know I act alone and won't blame my family for what I'm about to do. There's not a chance in hell Lucy is marrying someone else.

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### Chapter Five

#### Luciana

I thought lunch was interminable with Luis today, but dinner is excruciating. I'm at Domingo's, and we cooked together like we have plenty of times. It would be a typical evening if he weren't hovering so much. He pulled his chair even closer to mine at his dining room table that seats eight.

I told him to give me a month to get a wedding dress and make some arrangements. I said he should book the church and tell his parents we'll marry as soon as there's a Saturday available. He called the church office immediately, but of course, they're closed at eight o'clock at night.

He's being nauseatingly lovey-dovey with me, and I just want to push his hands away every time he touches me.

Not only is it annoying because I can't reach for anything without him being in the way, it reminds me how much I enjoyed Esteban touching me.

How much better everything was with him for those few moments when I lost all sense of reason.

Every time I see him, it reminds me of how he felt, how he smelled, how he tasted, how he sounded.

It haunts me. The only guilt I feel is that I don't feel guilty that I cheated.

I didn't start the kiss, and it stunned me too much to realize what I was doing was wrong.

At least, not that first time. But it doesn't change the fact that I allowed it.

No part of me feels compelled to confess to Domingo because he may annoy me, but he doesn't deserve me hurting him.

Allaying my conscience at his expense is even more selfish.

Never mind that he'd go on a rampage and wind up dead.

I know Domingo's killed before, and I know he'll kill in the future.

He's in a cartel, and he's about to join the Cartel.

But my money is on Esteban if it comes to any kind of fight.

I may not want to marry Domingo, but I don't want him dead.

I also don't want to risk the chance that Esteban loses.

I don't trust the man, but something deep inside me tells me I should.

I don't know what my subconscious has figured out that it's not telling my conscious mind.

But I feel safer with Esteban than I do anyone else.

Now that I've pressed against him, I know he's bigger and clearly stronger than Domingo—who's not a small or weak man to begin with.

Esteban's easily the same size as Enrique.

Luis is leaner from too many stays in prisons.

He's never there as a sentence but to hold "meetings." Even as an honored guest, the food's still shit.

He's in and out often enough that he stays trimmer than my other brother.

I'd still wager everything I have on Luis if I had to choose between him and anyone but Enrique.

They would never fight for any reason other than to fool someone, but if they did, I truly don't know who would win.

When I think of Esteban in a fight with anyone besides my brothers, I don't doubt for a moment he'd come out the winner.

His sheer will and aura are enough to keep most men from picking a fight.

But there's also something about him that tells me he'll never capitulate.

I don't sense that it's competitiveness or his ego or even survival.

It's like my brothers. It's honor. It's not betraying his family name and allowing anyone to think they're weak.

It's that relentless drive that makes me feel protected when I'm with him.

Even if he works for my tío , and I don't know that I can forgive him for that—though Enrique's comments make me question that situation—I still feel safe.

As though his sheer presence wasn't enough, it's the way he calls me chiquita .

It'd be patronizing as fuck if Domingo did it. It feels special when Esteban does. No one calls me Lucy. It's way too Anglicized, but I like that too. It's something only he does. That should raise every red flag and sound every alarm, but it doesn't.

I know it's no coincidence he keeps showing up.

It should feel stalkerish, but something is going on, and I realized it before Luis hinted at it today.

Esteban is watching me, but it doesn't creep me out.

I can tell he's aware of everyone and everything around him every minute that he's awake.

I feel like he's guarding me. That he doesn't think I'm safe without him nearby.

Men like him and my brothers know to listen to their intuition.

I do, too. It's why I said nothing to Luis and why I believed Enrique when he said I can trust Esteban even if he works for Tío Humberto.

“Ana?”

“Hmmm?” Fuck. How long did I space out?

“Do you want more boronía ?”

“No thanks.”

I hate plantains. I don't know how many times I have to tell Domingo that.

He loves them and loves the plantain and eggplant with tomato sauce dish.

I loathe it. He once scolded me like I was a child and told me I had to have at least a bite.

I walked out of the restaurant. He tossed some money on the table and rushed out after me.

He tried to scold me for that too, but I pulled out my phone and pulled up Enrique's contact.

He shut the fuck up the moment he realized I would tell my brother.

I'm not prone to temper tantrums or running to hide behind my brothers.

But the ink was barely dry on the marriage contract, and I wanted him to understand his family might have bought the marriage, but he didn't buy me.

I wanted him to know how close I am to my brothers that they would defend me over something as trivial as a dish I don't want to eat.

That they'd make time for me if I called and was upset.

It worked. He still offers the shit, but he doesn't insist.

"Your mind is somewhere else tonight. Are you finally thinking about all you need to do to get ready? You need to sell your condo. It'll be good practice."

Practice? Like the career I want is some game.

I'm not interested in residential real estate.

I've always wanted to do commercial. When I was younger, I thought it would give me a chance to work alongside my dad since he's in commercial development.

I understand now that he won't let me near that business, even if it's legit.

Before my engagement, I planned to move to NYC or stay in LA, where I went to college.

Miami would have been nice, but far more dangerous than the other two cities, since it would be obvious I'm a wealthy Colombian woman.

People would automatically assume—rightly—that my family is Cartel. It wouldn't take much to discover my father's the most powerful man in Latin America. Nothing happens in Latin America or the Caribbean without him knowing about it. Legal or illegal. I could blend in better in NYC or LA.

“Ana, for fuck's sake. Would you pay attention?”

“Don't swear at me, Domingo.”

“Then pay attention when I'm speaking. I don't like this awkwardness. It's not attractive.”

“Is that what matters? That I'm attractive? What happens when I age or get stretch marks from being pregnant? You going to be more flagrant about your infidelities?”

He stares at me for a moment before sneering at me. “What I do is my business.”

“Birth control doesn't just keep a husband from impregnating his wife.”



I thought I would never cheat, and part of me argues what I did with Esteban was way wrong, but not truly cheating.

Maybe I'm justifying myself, but it was nothing more than a couple way too passionate kisses.

I didn't sleep with him. I didn't get him off, and he didn't get me off either.

There was no emotional connection before or since, even if I think about him constantly.

But to call it an indiscretion is so fucking trite that it only makes it feel worse.

"That's not funny, Ana."

"Am I laughing?"

"Don't test me. You won't like the answer."

"You cannot keep me under lock and key. You cannot control everywhere I go or everyone I see. Not if you want to live and not if you don't want my father or brothers to destroy your family. Push me too hard, and you won't like where I land."

I've known he's been unfaithful from the start.

It's not some shitty cultural stereotype.

He's just that selfish. He pretends to dote on me, but he's never intended to give up anything for this marriage while expecting me to give up everything.

I was prepared to give up plenty, but not because of another fucked-up cultural

stereotype.

I would've turned a blind eye for my family's sake.

For the people they protect. For the mouths they feed, the roofs they keep over people's heads.

Thousands of people rely on my father. Money spent fighting a rival family is money that can't be reinvested into our people.

My loyalty to my family and our people is the only reason I'm going through with this.

For better or for worse, my father employs people around the world.

They and their families depend on their jobs.

I won't keep a penny from them just because I don't want to marry Domingo.

Thinking about this makes me feel guilty for dragging my heels.

I talk a good game, but I haven't lived up to my pledges.

My conscience doesn't scream at the thought I betrayed Domingo, but it does when I think I've betrayed these people.

I talk a big game, too. Domingo might be fine breaking a holy sacrament, but I never will be.

Sure, I'll promise him my fidelity, and I suppose that means something to me.

But I wouldn't break my vows because of my faith, and I wouldn't break them because I'm promising in front of my parents, brothers, and sister. I won't destroy their trust in me.

“Ana, you're as good as mine already. A priest is the least of my concerns. You will obey, and if you think about embarrassing me with some affair, you'll learn how unforgiving I am.”

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This is escalating fast. Part of me wants to see how far he'd go before we're even married, when I can still break things off without a divorce and too big of a scandal.

But we're at his place, so I don't control this location.

I know the place inside and out, but I only have the gun and knife I carry in my purse that's in the living room.

I have nothing else to defend myself with like I do at my condo.

I don't have my security team either. They're staked out around my building.

I only have Santi outside in the car in the driveway. He won't hear me scream.

I twist in my seat as though it'll make it easier for me to see him, but it gives me enough room to jump out of my seat. I know I can't beat him to the living room, but it'll make it easier to fight him if I'm free of the chair. It also makes the chair a potential weapon.

What the ever-loving fuck?

I'm not just thinking about how to flee his house. I'm considering how to kill my fiancé if this argument gets out of hand. This is beyond any level of fucked-up I expected.

"Just because I won't fight you about your mistresses doesn't mean I'm not keeping a tally of your transgressions. Remember who needs who more, Domingo."

I notch up my chin and stare down my nose at him. I won't show a moment's hesitation.

"This argumentative side of you is unappealing. I suggest you tame it before you say, 'I do.'"

"If I'm so unattractive and unappealing, you can walk away."

We both know he can't. Neither can I, but he really can't because his father can't afford the war he started with papá .

"Once we're married, you won't be so brave. You think you can push me away, but you can't. You sure as fuck won't once both my rings are on your finger."

He intends them to be a noose.

"I am my father's daughter and my brothers' sister. I wouldn't forget that once we're locked in a house together for good."

Take that veiled threat for what you want, you gilipollas. Dickhead.

"You think too highly of yourself, Ana."

"Next time you go shooting with Kiko and Lucho, ask who the best shot in the family is. Depending on the day, it's mamá , Catalina, or me. And you can guess what that means, since I know you've seen papá and my brothers shoot."

No one outside my immediate family would dare use those nicknames for my brothers.

It's a reminder to him just how close we are.

I might warn him how well the women shoot, but he won't be prepared for my mother or my sister—particularly my mother.

She'll skin his huevos , fry them up, and serve his balls to him for breakfast before she guts him.

My mother doesn't play when it comes to protecting her children.

My father's had to keep her from marching into battle more than once.

He remains quiet, and maybe he's realized he's met his match when I mention mamá and Catalina. They both have reputations for being fiery Latinas. I'm considered the easygoing one in the family since I'm the baby.

"Help me clean up... Please. Then we can go to bed."

It sounded like he choked on that "please." He wants to be conciliatory, and it's bullshit.

He gathers plates, and I take the glasses and empty salad bowl.

When I turn away from the sink, I realize he's boxed me in.

The butcher knife is within reach when I steady myself against the counter. He's gentle when he cups my cheek.

"We both got angry and said things we shouldn't have tonight.

I doubt it's the last time we'll argue, but I don't want to get to this point again.

I don't want it to get ugly like this. Until tonight, we were both making the best of

things.

I care about you, Ana. I'd rather make you happy than angry. "

He brushes his thumb over my cheek. If I weren't still fuming and now completely suspicious of our future, it would be sweet.

He didn't apologize, and that didn't slip past me.

But I won't apologize either. I meant every word, just like he did.

We stare at each other until he leans in to kiss me. It's familiar and not unpleasant.

It would be easy to slip back into the way things have been. It would be easy to go along to get along. It would be easy to release the sexual frustration I've felt since being with Esteban. It's so tempting to just fuck for the sake of fucking.

I let him deepen the kiss as he wraps his arms around me. He cups my ass and presses my hips against his hard-on. I know the sex would be good if I wanted to have it, but I don't. Not with him. When he moves to kiss along my neck, I place my hands on his chest and add a little pressure.

"I got my period yesterday."

I didn't. It's not due for another few days, but he was away last month when I had it, so he doesn't know how long it's been. Not that I think he bothers keeping track. I just know that, unlike other men in my past, he refuses to have sex during it. I've used the excuse before.

"That's all right."

He continues to kiss my throat before taking my hand and trying to draw me away from the counter.

He wants me to blow him, and in the past, I would have.

I don't mind it, even though I don't love it.

There's not a chance in hell I'm getting on my knees for him tonight.

Not on the floor or on the bed. It might feel empowering to know I have that much control over whether he gets off, but he won't see it that way.

Not when he undoubtedly slides his fingers into my hair and pushes my head toward his dick, so I take him deeper.

There's another niggling thought, too.

It feels wrong to be with someone after the way Esteban made me feel.

It wouldn't be fair to any man since I doubt any other could live up to the pedestal I've put Esteban on.

Try as I might, I can't deny there's something drawing us together.

There's something between us I've never experienced before.

It feels like a betrayal to be with someone else when I have these bewildering and conflicted feelings about him. The betrayal would be fucking Domingo.

"Arguing's made my cramps worse. I don't feel well now."



I make my expression match how miserable I sound.

Domingo stares at me for a moment before offering me another kiss.

He stops with just that, and once again, it would be sweet if I weren't still upset about the side of him I saw tonight.

Forget about Esteban for a moment. Domingo still said some fucked-up shit.

“Let's go to bed, Ana.”

It doesn't take long for us to get ready, brushing our teeth at the side-by-side sinks.

We climb into bed, and he tries to get me to lie with my head on his chest. I roll away and onto my side, but I compromise by reaching back for him.

His spoons me, and I exhale. It isn't contentment like Domingo thinks as he kisses my shoulder.

It's accepting I'm trapped in this engagement.

It's Esteban I'm thinking about as I fall asleep.

It's him I dream about, and I wake up aroused in the middle of the night.

It was the most vivid dream I've had so far.

I almost believe he's the one wrapped around me, but the cologne is different.

I've woken Domingo before to have sex, and I could do that now.

I could tell him I went to the bathroom and realized I only spotted and didn't really have my period.

I could fuck for the sake of getting off.

In the dark, maybe I could imagine I'm with Esteban instead.

I have to get my mind under control. These thoughts are completely pointless. Utterly futile. I need to stop.

What if I can't?

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

## Chapter Six

Esteban

Fuck my life.

Fuck this hard-on I have.

Fuck. That's what I want to do as I watch Lucy enter the party we're both at.

She's on Domingo's arm and looks absolutely stunning.

She'd be the picture of perfection if not for the ape tugging her arm.

As though she knows I'm already here, she looks in my direction.

I watch her inhale, caving in her stomach and pressing out her tits.

Tits I've felt pressed against me. Tits I want to bare and suck.

Tits I want to tease and torture with clamps as she rides me.

My nightly dreams have only become more lurid except for the ones where I'm searching for her in a house that's ablaze or during a shootout.

Those make me wake up in a sweat just like the sex dreams, but I wake in terror rather than aching frustration.

I smile to acknowledge her, but I can't do anything more without people noticing.

I don't want to draw Domingo's attention.

We've never gotten along. Not as kids and not as adults.

I don't know him well, but social situations have forced me to be around him. He's been nothing short of a prick.

Knowing Lucy spent last night at his place nearly killed me.

I can barely keep myself from picturing them together. It's driving me crazy.

It's only intensified when we're seated across from each other at the dinner.

It's a charity event, so I don't know the host and hostess well enough to ask to move.

I can't just rearrange the place settings since I'm one of the few single people here.

I'd have to search to avoid separating a couple.

I barely acknowledge Domingo with a nod and flash a smile to Lucy to be polite.

I'm acutely aware of her all night as I speak to the men sitting on either side of me.

It could be my imagination, but she seems cold to Domingo and keeps a steady conversation going with the woman to her left.

Domingo keeps glancing at me since there are lulls in his conversation with the guy to his right.

Lucy doesn't look at him or speak to him once during the entire meal, but I know she keeps watching me. We catch each other doing it.

As the meal ends—finally—I hear Lucy speak to Domingo.

“Excuse me for a moment. I need to find a bathroom.”

When she raises an eyebrow and Domingo nods, I want to know what the fuck that means. Did they fuck on the way here, and she needs to freshen up?

I hurry to leave the dining room without making it obvious.

I spot Lucy heading up the stairs toward the mansion's bedrooms. It's no coincidence we lock gazes.

When she reaches the landing, I'm subtle as I move through the crowd to where I'm certain there are servants' stairs.

All the upstairs doors are closed except for one, which is barely ajar.

It's out of sight of the main staircase.

I slip inside and lock the door. I can smell her perfume.

She steps out of the bathroom. Somehow, we're colliding into each other in a kiss that makes our first one look like a peck. I nip her bottom lip before she sucks my tongue into her mouth. I curl her sleek ponytail around my hand and tug. Not enough to hurt, but enough to make her look up at me.

“What did that look mean? The one you gave Domingo. It was some type of message between a couple. The kind where you know what each other is thinking because

you're that intimate."

"He is my fiancé."

She says it like she's stating the obvious, yet she's still in my arms, her hands fisting my tuxedo jacket.

"Did you fuck on the way here? Did you come up here to wipe his cum off?"

Her eyes widen with shock. Is it my crassness or that I even dared to ask?

"He thinks I have my period. I told him that to get out of sex last night. I came up here praying you'd follow me."

"Why?"

"Why what? To the first part or the second?"

"Both. Why'd you lie to him?"

She tugs on my lapels and goes onto her toes. She starts this kiss, but I soon take over. I back her against a wall and pull her gown up as my other hand slides up her leg. I stop short of touching her pussy.

"I don't give a shit what time of the day, month, or year it is. When you're mine, I'll fuck you no matter what."

"When I'm yours? Esteban, we have to stop." She closes her eyes. "I'll never be yours. I have to marry him, and I won't break my vows."

"Lucy, you're mine the moment you agree. I've been yours since the moment I saw

you in that cafe. You don't love him."

Her eyes fly open. "And you assume I'll love you one day? Or do you assume I'd go from one loveless relationship to another?"

"I don't need to assume a damn thing, and you know that as well as I do."

"I don't know you, and you don't know me."

I rake my hand through my hair as I glance at the door. I pull my phone from my pocket and unlock it. I tap on my contacts, showing her my screen as I do. The first three contacts under my favorites are my parents and Alicia. She frowns as she notices the fourth is Enrique, and the fifth is Luis.

"Why do you have my brothers' numbers saved like that?"

It's not just that her brothers' numbers are in my phone.

They're saved as Kiko and Lucho. I know only their sisters and parents call them that.

I tap on my cloud app and use the password to open it before I scroll through folders that are years old until I find the one I want. I turn my phone toward her again.

"I went by Steven in college."

"You were my brother's roommate." Her brow furrows. "I watched you play soccer together. You're even bigger than you were then."

Her gaze sweeps over me in appreciation, and it makes my cock ache.

“I didn’t recognize you.”

“We never said more than a passing hello.”

Her eyes narrow, and she tries to push away from me. I step back, not crowding her.

“If you’re so close to my brother, then how can you betray him? How can you work for my tío ?”

“Because your brother told me to.”

She stops short, and the color drains from her face. I reach out for her, and she lets me pull her against me. She burrows her face against my chest, and I peer down at her as she closes her eyes again.

“You could die for what you’re doing.”

“I know. But your brother is my best friend, besides my cousin Alicia. Besides Luis, I’m his. I work for your brother in New York, but I’m down here because your father isn’t safe.”

“Why have you been spying on me?”

“You don’t believe that’s what I’ve been doing. If you did, you would have told Luis. He would have either explained to you or killed me. Neither has happened. You know why, even if you haven’t admitted it.”

“I already have guards.”

“Who have served your father for decades. That doesn’t mean I think they’re good enough.”



“They’d die for me.”

“I know they would. But they have their own families. I couldn’t fault them if they hesitated, even for a second. You might not have a second to spare.”

Life has a fucked-up way of proving you wrong. It has just as fucked-up a way of proving you right. Gunfire rings through the air downstairs. I shove Lucy into the bathroom.

“Lock it. Don’t open it to anyone but me. Call your brothers.”

“No, Este! Don’t go down there.”

“I have to find a way to get you out. You have a gun and a knife, right?”

Her cocktail purse isn’t that big, but I can tell it’s heavier than it looks from the faint line left by the strap pressing into her shoulder. She nods. I pull the door shut, but she tries to stop me again.

“ Chiquita, obey me, or I will take you home, bare your beautiful ass, and spank it until my hand hurts. Then I will spank it for making my hand hurt.”

“Yes, D—Este.”

What was she going to call me?

I snag her chin between my thumb and index finger.

“You wouldn’t obey him like this. You aren’t his. You’re mine.”

I give her a punishing kiss before she lets me shut the door. I hear it lock, then I hear

the shower curtain open and close.

Chiquita buena .

I inch toward the door and put my ear to it as I check my gun.

I know it's loaded, but my father and grandfather drilled it into me to always check before exposing myself to shots intended to kill me.

I ease the door open and inch down the hallway.

I hear voices begging for mercy. I spy Domingo at the foot of the stairs, his eye already swelling shut.

Interesting.

He was coming to find Lucy. I watch a guy reach around Domingo's back and pull his gun free from the holster. He drops it and kicks it away; one of his co-hostage takers picks it up and holsters it under his arm.

"Empty your pockets."

Domingo reaches back with his right hand.

"No. Not your wallet. Your knives. Now."

The guy—I'm certain it's Paco Hierro despite the ski mask—puts the gun to Domingo's forehead.

I watch his finger flex over the trigger, and I'm certain Domingo saw it, too.

He withdraws one knife, then another. Paco shoves him backwards, but Domingo's sturdier than Paco expects.

He barely sways. Fucking dumbass. He should have had Domingo turn his pockets inside out.

I'm certain he has at least one, if not two more knives for situations just like this. I know I do.

"Where is she?"

"Who?" Domingo's expression appears confused, but he's a shit actor.

"Where is el jefe's daughter? That's who you were going to look for."

"I don't know. That's why I was looking."

"What do you mean you don't know where your woman is? Stop lying, Domingo."

"I'm not. She was supposed to be in the bathroom, but she's not."

"So, you thought she went up to a bedroom?"

"Maybe this one was in use when she tried it. I don't know."

Paco shoves Domingo's chest, then gestures to go up the stairs. The latter doesn't budge. Paco draws back to punch Domingo, but Domingo blocks it with an uppercut that snaps Paco's head back. In Paco's confusion, he lets go of the gun when Domingo grabs it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

“You hit me once, and I let you. I needed you close enough to take your gun once you drew it. Thank you.”

Paco’s shocked, but I’m certain it was at the punch’s force, not about losing his gun. Neither Chuy nor Cokie reacted to Domingo taking Paco’s weapon. I’m not waiting around to see how the charade plays out. It confirms what I learned today.

I need to get Lucy out pronto . I ease away from my hiding place and move on silent feet as I check the servants’ stairs. I hear nothing below, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t someone there waiting for anyone to run downstairs or waiting to charge up here.

I creep down them, my finger around the trigger with the safety off.

I can see the kitchen door, and it’s clear inside.

I don’t know who’s out there, but I’m certain Humberto didn’t send only three—four—men.

I take the stairs back up as silently as I did when I came down them.

I text my driver to meet us by the back gate.

If I need to, I’ll lift Lucy over the fence.

I ease the bedroom door open and lightly tap on the bathroom one.

“ Chica ?”

I don’t get a response. My heart races as I test the door handle. It’s locked.

“ Chiquita .”

I hear movement, but I don’t hear the lock turn.

“His jersey was number twenty, and he has a scar on his right knee from a motorcycle accident when he was fourteen. Your mother threatened to give him a matching one for being on a bike too young.”

The lock flips, and I feel the knob twist against my palm.

I point my gun toward the floor as Lucy opens the door.

I wrap my free arm around her waist and lift her off her feet.

She cups my face, staring at me for a heartbeat before kissing me.

I gladly return it before more shouting snaps us back to reality.

I take her hand, and she follows me without question.

We make our way down to the kitchen as we hear Domingo yelling for Lucy. I glance over my shoulder and find her looking at the kitchen door with her gun pointed toward it. The look of disgust on her face reassures me she has no intention of letting go and choosing Domingo instead.

“He’s part of this, isn’t he?” I barely hear her and rely on reading her lips to be sure I understand.

My lips flatten as I turn my head to look at the door.

I shift my focus back to her and nod. She stares at me, and she's deduced I already knew.

I need to make sure she understands I only found out today that Humberto's been extorting Domingo for gambling debt the cabrón racked up two years ago.

Domingo's father knew and arranged the marriage to save his son's ass.

I didn't know about the attack tonight. I can't tell her any of this right now.

I guide her outside, knowing she keeps checking behind us as I lead. I scan our surroundings and spy the back gate. We're almost to it, and I see Ricco waiting on the other side when Domingo's voice fills the air.

“Ana!”

That wasn't fear. That was rage.

“Este?”

“You're mine, chiquita .”

Maybe one of these days she'll believe it.

I hate hearing her uncertainty, but I can't dwell on that.

I try to open the gate before I notice the padlock.

There's nothing I can do about it now. Trying to shoot it off is more likely to wound

Lucy or me when the bullet ricochets.

I scoop her over my shoulder and step on to the bottom of the ornate metal gate.

“I’m here, capitán .”

“Ricco?”

“ Sí, señorita .”

My driver tonight is one of Josue’s men. Enrique sent me, and he made sure his father knew someone loyal would be inside and outside if anything happened. I hand Lucy to him, and he helps her to her feet as I scale the fence. I hop down and once again scoop Lucy over my shoulder.

“I can run.”

“Not in those heels.”

“I’ll kick them off. I’m slowing you down.”

“You’ll trip over your gown.”

These are plausible explanations, but I really just want her in my arms. Cradling her would make it hard to run. Over my shoulder, she’s like a feather compared to men I’ve had to carry.

“Este—”

“Enough, Lucy.” I swat her ass.

“Yes, sir.”

I barely hear her, and I’m certain Ricco didn’t.

I see the car ahead of us with the driver’s side open.

Ricco hurries to pass me and get to the backdoor ahead of me to open it for Lucy and me.

As he comes past, I slam my elbow into his temple.

It stuns him, and he trips. As he falls, Lucy slams her fist against my back.

“Why’d you do that? Put me down! Ricco!”

“Stop screaming unless you want Domingo to come after us.”

That silences her as we get to the car. It’s running with no beeps, so I know the fob must still be in here. I open the front passenger side and less than ceremoniously dump Lucy onto the seat.

“Don’t.”

She glares at me as I push her gown out of the way and barely keep from slamming the door.

I run around the hood, trusting she won’t shoot me as I climb into the driver’s seat.

I know she still has her gun. No one will pry that away from her.

I fully expect her to point it at me, but it rests in her lap.



I'm pulling away from the curb as I shut my door, and the first bullet hits the reinforced metal.

I glance in the rearview mirror and know it was Ricco.

He's pressing his earpiece and likely reporting me to Josue's head of security.

The next round strikes the bulletproof window beside Lucy.

I glance over and see Domingo running toward us.

She'd be dead if this car weren't a mini tank.

"Where are you taking me, Esteban?"

### Chapter Seven

Luciana

I know better than to reach for the steering wheel despite the temptation.

Esteban is stronger than me and clearly trained to drive while pursued.

He takes turns at the last minute but maintains control of the vehicle.

I look at the gun in my lap, and I know I could kill him.

All I'd have to do is tilt it and have it aimed straight at his heart. That doesn't tempt me in the least.

"Esteban, answer me. Where are you taking me?"

"To your parents' house."

"Then why did you stop Ricco?"

"Because I trust no one besides your father and brothers. None of them are here, so no one else gets near you."

"Domingo? Is he?—"

"Yes. I found out today. I told Josue and Enrique. They sent me to the party to guard

you.”

“They let me go anywhere with Domingo?”

“He doesn’t know anyone found out.”

“Then what the hell was that?”

“I don’t know for sure. Something Humberto orchestrated.”

“I heard Paco.”

“And I saw him. I don’t know if Domingo’s in on it or joined in once he recognized the Hierros. He didn’t put up a fight. He took one of Paco’s guns, and neither Chuy nor Cokie did anything about it. Paco just drew another one.”

“He shot at me.”

“I know, chiquita .”

“He knows the car’s bulletproof.”

“He did it to make a point. He will kill you before he lets Humberto kill him.”

“Why would my tío kill him? Because he’s loyal to?—”

I stop myself when I realize the error in my thinking. I tremble and wring my hands. Then I slide my left hand down my right arm as though I’m wiping off something invisible.

“God, I want a shower.”

“You told me?—”

“I didn’t fuck him today!” I scream but then take a breath. “He’s touched me. Period. I feel filthy. We haven’t had sex since before the cafe. I’ve made excuses.”

I finish in barely more than a whisper. Esteban rests his gun on his left thigh as he fishes out his cell phone.

I know he glances over at me, but I’m staring out the window.

When I realize he’s going to make a call, I shift my attention and watch him hit a contact’s name I can’t see before putting it on speaker.

I pretend disinterest until a voice answers.

“Esteban?”

“ Papá !”

“You’re on speakerphone, jefe .” Esteban might use papá ’ s name when he talks about him, but he would never use it when he talks to him.

“Ana, are you hurt? Ricco said Esteban hit him and drove off with you.”

“Esteban trusts no one.”

“I don’t, jefe . If the man’s not in your family, then I don’t trust him with Lucy.”

Mierda . Fuck.

“Lucy?”

?Qué mierda de vida ! Fuck my life!

I don't want to explain that, and I doubt Este does either. I'll contemplate why I came up with a nickname for him later. I need to distract my dad.

“ Papá , Domingo shot at us.”

The line goes silent for a moment.

“The gate will open long enough for the car to get through. Drive straight into the garage. I'll be waiting for you.”

“Pa—”

“Do exactly what Esteban says, hija . You're as safe with him as you are your brothers or me.”

Why didn't anyone tell me this sooner? Why didn't I meet Este sooner? When I look up at him, I understand. My family uses him when they trust no one else to infiltrate a group. The fewer people who know his connection to us the better for us and the safer for him. I sit back and close my eyes.

“ Sí, papá. ”

“Take care of her, Esteban.”

I watch him transfer his phone to the hand that's holding the wheel. He slides his free one over mine, wrapping his fingers around it and sliding his fingers along my palm. I look over at him as he takes his eyes off the road long enough to meet my gaze.

“Of course, jefe .”

He's speaking to my dad, but he's saying so much more to me with his eyes.

I curl my fingers around his and squeeze his hand.

I let go, and he shifts his phone back to that hand.

He ends the call, and I stare out the window again until we pull up to my parents' house.

The moment Este can inch the car forward, he passes through the gate.

I watch in the sideview mirror as it changes directions before it can even open all the way.

A garage door rises, and he pulls straight in. I see my dad, but I know the protocols.

Este doesn't turn off the engine until the door's an inch from the ground.

I don't touch the car door handle, instead waiting for papá to open it for me.

I glance at Este, and he nods. I've never, ever looked to someone for permission to go to my dad.

Maybe not permission, but an acknowledgement that it's safe.

I watch Este as I unfasten my seatbelt as papá opens my door.

Then somehow I'm in my dad's arms. It's always felt like the safest place in the world to be.

He's in his late fifties and can still run six miles at the same pace he did in his

twenties.

He lifts weights in the basement daily and boxes four times a week.

Papá definitely doesn't have a dad bod. He reminded me of the Hulk when I was little, except he would never shred his designer suits.

This mountain of a man has made the ugly and scary world disappear for the past twenty-two years.

Now I'm looking past his shoulder for Este.

He calls me Lucy, and I call him Este. I'm certain no one calls him that. He's not a man who goes by nicknames any more than Enrique or Luis do with the outside world. But he hasn't stopped me, just like I haven't stopped him from calling me Lucy.

“ Jefe , I need to talk to you.”

I cling to my dad since I can't run to Este. Whatever they have to discuss can't be good. I already sense they're leaving, and we haven't even gotten inside the house.

Papá guides me inside, and Este follows us. Mamá runs to me and practically snatches me from papá , who wisely pulls his arm away just in time. My mom kisses my forehead over and over, and I sink against her. The danger we were in slams into me, and I squeeze my eyes shut and cling to my mom.

“ Jefe ?”

I open my eyes when Este speaks. He's watching me, but his head tilts to the hallway that leads to my father's office. How the hell does he know it's down there unless

he's been here before?

“Matáis, join us.”

I hadn't noticed my sister or Matáis in the living room.

He's holding Catalina while they watch mamá and me.

They walk over together, and my sister hugs me as the men leave us in the foyer.

Este may not have been a part of it, but mamá , Catalina, and I have been in this situation countless times.

In the past three years, Matáis has been part of it, too.

It surprises none of us when, half an hour later, papá and Este are leaving the house dressed in all black.

Este's wearing some of Matáis's cargo pants and a long-sleeve Henley.

Matáis keeps a spare go bag here since this has happened before.

Mamá gets a kiss from papá that's embarrassed my siblings and me since we were kids. Normally, I can't watch Catalina and Matáis since they're no better. Right now, Matáis is hugging my sister again as she and I wait to say our goodbyes to our dad.

“ Te amo, papá. ” Catalina and I speak at the same time when he wraps one arm around each of us.

“ Os quiero mucho, mijas. ” I love you so much, my daughters.



I step away from papá as he gives mamá one more hug. I want to share with Este the kind of kiss my parents had, but we know it's not possible with the others around.

“Be careful, Este.” I keep my voice low, but we know the others notice us talking.

“Go nowhere unless your mother tells you to. Wait for me to come back before you decide what to do next.”

I nod, but his gaze hardens. A silent command I want to answer.

“Sí, Este.”

“My good chiquita .” He mouths the words as he shifts like he's adjusting the bag on his shoulder. Only I can see his lips move.

Then they're gone.

I nearly jump out of my skin when mamá 's phone rings.

None of us have paid attention to the movie we're watching.

Matáis has checked on our guards every half hour for the past four hours.

When he isn't doing that, he's shared the loveseat with Catalina.

Mamá and I are curled up together on the sofa.

She reaches for the phone on the coffee table, and I see Cachetes on the screen.

Cheeks.

It's Enrique. Mamá still calls him that because he had the roundest and fattest cheeks as a baby even though the rest of him was always long and slender.

“ Mijo ?” My son.

“ Sí, mamá .”

Something's wrong.

“Kiko?!” I try to snatch the phone, but mamá moves it away from me.

“Is Cat there?” We can hear him because mamá holds the phone out.

“I'm here, Kiko. You're freaking us out. You don't sound right.”

“ Mamá , put us on speaker.”

No, no, no!

Luis is on the phone too, and I know he's not with Enrique right now. They wouldn't three-way call us just to say hi. It's no one's birthday and not a holiday.

“ Mamá, papá está muerto .”

There's a moment of silence before the most gut wrenching, blood-curdling scream comes from my mom. She drops the phone, and I stare at it. Catalina does the same. It's Matáis who has the wherewithal to pick it up.

“Enrique?”

“Matáis? Thank God you're there.”

The relief in Enrique's voice is palpable.

He and Luis must have believed we were alone in the house.

Silent tears trail down my cheeks just like they do my sister's.

Mamá sobs with a keening wail every few seconds.

Catalina and I wrap our arms around her as she rocks.

We look at each other over our mom's head. Neither of us knows what to do.

"Who?"

It's mamá who asks the single most important question.

"He's dead too." That was Luis.

"Humberto?"

"No, mamá . The man who did it." Luis speaks softly as he explains, but he could be shouting for how loudly it rings in my ears.

"What about tío ?" Catalina meets my gaze as she asks.

"Caty."

Matáis's voice holds an edge of warning I've never heard him use with her before. Only he calls her that. She shakes her head and tries to shake loose of his hold as he wraps his arms around her. I don't even remember when they both left the loveseat and moved over to the sofa.

“Caty.”

My sister turns a mutinous glare on Matáis, but she doesn’t fight him anymore.

Instead, she lets go of mamá and turns toward her fiancé.

Mamá ’s staring at the phone I put on the coffee table.

She’s wrapped her arms around her waist and leans forward as she rocks.

She pulled away when Catalina turned to Matáis.

My sister has her fiancé, and my mother doesn’t want me.

I have never felt more alone than I do right now.

I have a fiancé—or at least I did. I shouldn’t have to be alone, but I am.

“Kiko, what about Esteban?” I can’t stop the question because I didn’t know I was going to ask it.

“Banged up but alive.”

“Where’s papá ?” Mamá ’ s voice is hoarse already.

“On his way to Rafael’s.”

The mortician. Papá never made it to a hospital.

“When can I see him?”

“In the morning, mamá .”

“I want to see him now, mijo .”

“You can’t, mamá . You need to wait until morning.”

I close my eyes and suck my lips in between my teeth. It’s that bad that Rafael needs the rest of the night to make papá presentable.

“Enrique, I’m going.”

“ Mamá —”

“You may be el jefe now, but I still run this family. You will not keep me from my husband.”

If papá was the head of this family, mamá was the neck that turned it.

They trusted each other implicitly, and mamá was papá’s closest confidante.

She likely knows far too much. It wasn’t like papá was ever a hands-off or an absentee parent, but he ruled the Cartel while mamá ruled the family. It made for the perfect partnership.

“ Mamá , I need you to stay at the house with Matáis. I want all of you in the safe room until I know who we can trust.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Ma—”

“Luis, you won’t convince me either.”

“ Mamá , please don’t leave us.”

I grasp her hand as she starts to stand. She stares at me before she sits again. She wraps her arms around me and rocks me as she strokes my hair.

“Kiko, how soon can you get men here you trust?”

“Hopefully, not long, mamá . But I have to be positive before I agree to you leaving the estate. Promise me you’ll all go to the safe room. Matáis?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep my sisters there. Don’t take your eyes off any of them.”

My brothers know what Catalina and I are capable of.

They’ve seen us kill before. Papá made sure we knew how.

We learned alongside Enrique and Luis. We never discuss it, but situations beyond our control have forced Catalina and me to defend ourselves.

I carry a gun and a knife everywhere, just like she does.

My brothers know Catalina and I would have the best chance at succeeding if we wanted to kill Humberto.

They’re just unconvinced she and I would make it home.

“What will happen to him?”

“ Mamá , I’m taking care of it.”

“Will he keep breathing?”

There’s a pause before Enrique answers.

“For as long as I decide it’s convenient.”

Much like I’m not used to the command in Matáis’s voice when he warned Catalina not to do anything, I’m unprepared for the frigid tone Enrique has.

It’s one I’m certain many men hear just before they die.

It’s one that proves he’s already used to running part of my family’s empire.

No one can fake that level of authority in his voice.

He’s earned that confidence that his word is law.

I keep glancing at the door, praying Esteban will come here. I don’t know what he’s doing or if he’ll even think of me. But I need him.

### Chapter Eight

Esteban

I lift my shirt to be sure I'm not bleeding through the third set of bandages I've wrapped around my ribs. I see some red specks, but it's not as bad as it was before. The fucker who sliced me bled way more when I slit his throat. I just couldn't get to him before he shot Josue.

I close my eyes to block out the sight of that moment as I ran toward the shooter.

It was only a few seconds too late, but he saw me coming.

He grabbed his knife and swung at me. He cut me across my left ribs a second before I wrapped my left arm around his neck and pulled his head back so my right hand could cut his jugular and aorta.

My machete nearly took his head from his body.

It did once I checked on Josue. There was nothing any of us could do.

The bullet went straight through his heart.

He'd already taken one to the right thigh, and he had cuts on his arms from the initial attack when we arrived at the warehouse Humberto was at. I saw that fucker run like a little bitch the moment the bullet punctured his brother's chest.



I've spent the last four hours hunting him to no avail. I called Enrique as soon as I could, thinking I would be the one to break the news to him.

No.

That maldito pedazo de mierda already told Enrique, lying and swearing it was someone else.

My friend spoke to his father only an hour before we entered the building.

We were so sure we had the upper hand, but someone betrayed us.

I haven't figured out who, but I will. In the meantime, I want Lucy as far away from this shitstorm as I can get her.

I failed to protect Josue, but I won't fail to protect her.

I've been texting Matáis since I accepted I wouldn't find Humberto tonight.

I'm certain he's not only left Bogotá, but Colombia entirely.

Matáis will take Catalina somewhere undisclosed to anyone just like I'm taking Lucy somewhere only two other people will know about.

Enrique and Luis are en route from NYC. It's a nearly six-hour flight, so they're more than halfway here.

Matáis's four brothers came to Josue's house. Maria Rosa knows them as well as she does Matáis. Josue trusted them to guard all three women, and he already considered Matáis his third son. I trust them too. They'll stay with Maria Rosa while Matáis and I take our women to safe houses.

I already passed the two middle brothers as I came through the gate.

I nodded to the youngest as I pulled into the garage he opened for me.

There are spaces for six. It feels wrong pulling into Josue's, but it's the only one available.

Any car in the drive is a target for someone driving past. I slip into the house and look around.

There's a light on in the kitchen, but everywhere else is dark.

I peek into the room, but it's empty. I head to the stairs and check over my shoulder once I'm high enough to look down the hallway to Josue's office.

The light's on in there. It tempts me to check, but I'm certain it's Maria Rosa. I don't dare disturb her.

I don't know which room is Lucy's, so I put my ear to each.

I hear movement in one, so I flip open my knife as I open the door as slowly as I can.

I stare for a moment before I shut the door behind me silently.

Then I'm across the room, wrapping my arm around Lucy's waist and lifting her off the bedside table she's kneeling on in front of the window.

She tries to fight me.

“ Chiquita .”

She goes limp in my arms, and I feel her sigh.

She won't be so relieved in a moment. I haul her away from the table and carry her to the recliner in the corner of her room.

I have her jeans and panties down around her ankles and her over my knee faster than she can realize what's happening.

My hand lands across her perfect ass, and the sound rings throughout the room.

"Do not think about screaming, little girl. Once I tell your mother what you were about to do, she's likely to hand me a chancla to finish the job."

The wooden sole slippers are what Latino children's nightmares are made of.

Wielded by an angry abuela —grandmother—there's no more terrifying torture device in the world.

I don't know anyone who's actually been spanked by one, but that's because the threat of them was always enough to keep us from misbehaving.

I bring my hand down over and over as she tries to break free. She kicks her legs and attempts to roll away from me. I merely pull her tighter against me and hook my right leg over the back of hers.

"Este, stop. Stop! It hurts."

"I know it does. Can you imagine how much it would hurt your family if something happened to you? Can you imagine how much it would hurt me if I hadn't gotten here when I did? No. You will take this punishment for whatever foolish thing you thought to do."

“You don’t even know. Ow! You’re punishing me for something you think I was going to do. Owwwwiiieee !”

“Shh before you wake your sister and Matáis.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I scared you. Please, Este. Please stop.”

I squeeze her right ass cheek hard, and she whimpers. I massage it to take away some of the burn.

“You’re not in pajamas. You have the window open, and you were climbing onto the bedside table in front of the window.

It doesn’t take a genius to know your next step was onto the roof.

I don’t care if you were just going to sit there.

That’s needlessly dangerous. But I doubt sitting is all you planned.

I doubt it would be the first time you’ve sneaked out that window.

That alone probably warrants at least a dozen spankings. ”

“You are not my father. You don’t dole out pun?—”

I turn her around and position her between my open thighs, so her ass doesn’t rub against my pants. I fist her hair and hold her head in place as I kiss her. My hand slides up the back of her shirt and unhooks her bra before slipping around to cup the firmest yet softest breast I’ve ever held.

“I will dole out whatever punishment I see fit, whenever I see fit to give you one.

You will not risk your life, Lucy. You will not do reckless things that could get you hurt. Say whatever you want about anything. Disagree with me about anything. I will listen. But my will is unbendable when it comes to protecting you, even if it's from yourself. ”

I kiss her again, not giving her an opportunity to disagree with me.

I move my hand back and forth across her tits, lavishing attention on both of them.

She arches her back and moans against my lips.

My hand trails over her ribs and around to her bare ass.

I stroke it, allowing my fingers to dip between her cheeks.

“ Chiquita , you terrified me.”

“I'm sorry, D?—”

Her eyes widen before she looks away. She tries to get off my lap, but I tighten my hold around her.

“Say it, Lucy.”

She shakes her head.

“You were going to say it earlier tonight. You almost did it again. Say it.”

She pulls her lips between her teeth, but that doesn't stop me from kissing her.

She relents immediately, opening to me as my tongue invades her mouth.

My fingertips trail over her hip until I press her legs open.

Her pussy is so damn hot and wet. I slide my ring finger between her pussy lips, but I don't enter her. I tease her.

"You're right. I'm not your father. Does anything I'm doing make you think of one?"

"No, Este."

"You know it doesn't mean the same thing."

"It's too fucked-up."

"Because I've sworn to protect you. To take care of you. Because I have since we met. Because I'm bigger than you and stronger than you. Because I care about you. That's too fucked-up?"

"You know that's not what I mean. I've never said it before. Not ever. To no one."

"That's because it isn't a Spanish term."

She stares at me, and something passes between us.

"Chica, I'm not going anywhere. I will never betray you or your family. I wouldn't do that to you, and I wouldn't do that to your brother."

"How are you so damn certain?"

"How're you so certain you'd never fall in love with Domingo?"

"Don't say his name. I never want to hear it again. I just know I can't."

“If you’re so positive of something you can’t do, why can’t I be so positive of something I can do?”

“I’ve known him for over a year. I’ve known you a week.”

“Have you though? How many stories did you hear about Enrique and me when you knew me as Steven?”

“Tons.”

“How many times did you send extra bags of limón Chiclitos, so Enrique could share them with his friend Steven? You knew they were his favorite treat from home.”

“I didn’t know that was for you.”

“I used to crave the lemon- or lime-flavored corn chips when I first moved to the States because I was homesick. I didn’t move away from home as young as Enrique and Luis because I went to private schools here.

It was complete culture shock when I moved up there.

Your brother told you that, so you used to add extra treats in the packages you sent.

You used to tape notes on them that said ‘ sólo para Steven .’ You would tease Enrique about how he and I loved comic books and watched all the seasons of the same medical drama three times.

You know I graduated a year early just like he did.

You know I’m an only child who grew up in Medellín.

You know more about me than you realize. ”

She stares at me before nodding.



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

“You know a lot about me, too. You know I’m stubborn, but Enrique is one of the few people who can get me to agree to just about anything.

You know I hate being reminded I’m the baby of the family when the three of them tease me.

You know my favorite colors are green and purple because you always made sure the thank you cards you emailed had lilacs or violets on them.

You know how homesick I was when I first moved to LA.

You sent what probably should have been a year’s supply of Achira del Huila for me because you knew my favorite snack.

No one else in my dorm had ever had anything like them before.

They all wanted the crispy cheese sticks, but I ate them all in three weeks.

I nearly puked every day after soccer practice, but I devoured them.

You sent me more for Christmas. You sent me an autographed ‘El Pibe’ jersey for my graduation two months ago.

Even Enrique didn’t know how you got one of them from Carlos Valderama since it definitely didn’t come from eBay or some other online auction site.

Do you know more about me? Have you had an advantage since the cafe? Is that?—”

“ Chica , Enrique isn’t one to keep family photos around, and neither am I.

I saved the one I showed you of Enrique and me on an encrypted cloud.

It’s not safe for the people we care about.

I met you in passing when you were like fourteen.

You were my best friend’s kid sister, but nothing more.

Humberto wanted information about you, and I wanted to keep my promise to Enrique that I’d watch out for you once Humberto started poking around.

I had no idea I’d react to you the way I did. ”

She stares at me and nods.

“I feel the same. In some ways, I feel like I barely know you because you’re Este to me, but then I remind myself that you’re also Steven. That makes you feel so familiar.”

“You’re Luciana if I think of you as Enrique’s little sister back when we were in college. But you’re Lucy to me. You’re also my chiquita . Am I really only Este to you?”

She shakes her head.

“Say it then, chiquita .”

“I’m sorry I scared you, Daddy.”

She holds her breath as though she expects me to reject her. Instead, I slide a finger into her pussy. I know it's not nearly enough when she squirms, trying to lift her hips and open her legs.

"I decide, little one."

I ease a second finger into her, and she whimpers. Her deep brown eyes are like pools of whiskey as our gazes lock. This is the most vulnerable and open she's ever been with me. In this moment, I truly have all her trust.

"I'll always take care of you."

I slip a third finger into her and stroke her G-spot as my thumb rubs circles over her clit. I work her until she's covering her mouth with both hands to smother her moans.

"Please, may I come, Daddy?"

She whispers her request, but I shake my head. Hurt and frustration flash across her face.

"Carino, you won't come until I'm buried inside you and coming too. You will keep every drop of my cum in your tight little pussy because it belongs only to me now. Don't wear panties again. I'll only shred them."

I call her sweetheart because she's that to me, too.

"What about?—"

"He's still breathing for now. You and I both know your engagement ended the moment we met for real. You say you would've gone through with the wedding, but we both know I wouldn't have allowed it, and you would have agreed with me."

“You’re right.”

I carry her to the bed and place her on the mattress so I can peel her shirt off. Her bra’s already unfastened, so I toss that aside. She pushes my shirt up but freezes the moment she sees my bandages. I’d almost forgotten about them, except it hurts to breathe.

“What the hell, Este? You’re hurt!”

“And I know exactly what’ll cure it.”

“No. Do you have stitches?”

“A few.”

“You’ll rip them if we?—”

“I will if we’re doing it right.” I waggle my eyebrows.

She shakes her head while staring at my ribs. Her fingertips flutter above and below the edges of the bandages. She shakes her head again before looking up at me.

“You were there when it happened. You could have died too.”

“Yes, to both. You know the risks that come with being involved with a man like your father or me. But are you going to walk away from me—from us—because of what might happen?”

“How can you ask that the night my father died? What might happen did happen!”

Tears well in her eyes, and I could kick myself. Part of the reason I spanked her and

kept us talking was to distract her from thinking about what she lost. I just threw it in her face.

“Lucy, look at me.”

She does, and her tears break my heart.

“If you can’t live with this, if it’s too hard, I’ll walk away and leave you alone.

You know I can’t leave this life. I definitely wouldn’t bring you with me if I did.

It would put a target on you forever. It wouldn’t matter who your brother is because we wouldn’t have the same protection as we do now.

But if being with me will only remind you of what you lost, then I don’t want to hurt you like that. ”

“You’d leave me behind because it’s hard?”

“No. I’d respect your wishes if that’s what you want.”

“I prefer the man who won’t take no from me or anyone else when it comes to us being together. You and I both know I won’t say no to that man.”

I pull the shirt over my head and unfasten my pants, letting them drop to the floor.

I toe off the boots I loosened as soon as I got into the car since I hate how tight I wear them.

I yank my socks off too because I will never go to bed with a woman—with my woman—while wearing them. But I don’t take off my boxer briefs.

“If all you want is me to hold you or to pleasure you, I will. We don’t have to do anything more than that.”

“Are you always a cunt tease?”

It’s my turn to stand and blink as I stare at her. That is not what I expected her to say. I shake my head, and she hooks her fingers into the waistband.

“Luis warned me years ago that you have a dirty sense of humor. I forgot.”

“Blame it on my three older siblings corrupting me. They’re no better.”

She tugs at my boxer briefs as she comes onto her knees and inches back. I take a step forward, and she pushes them down. I step out of them before I climb onto the bed as she reclines.

“Where were you going if I hadn’t arrived when I did?”

“To look for you.”

“I thought you’d say to kill your tío .”

“The thought crossed my mind, but the longer time went by, and I hadn’t heard from you, the more frightened I got.

I texted Ricco to tell him I was safe, but I didn’t say where.

I asked him where to find you if I was looking.

I’m pretty certain he thinks I planned to murder you .

He gave me your address and a few questionable hotels where you might hide out.

He named our family physician too. I was going to start there. ”

“You were going to go out in the middle of the night to comb the streets of Bogotá alone?”

“I would have driven, not walked.”

“How did you plan to get a car out of the garage without the men stopping you?”

“Do you really believe papá would ever leave us stranded here?”

There must be a couple of cars parked on nearby streets as escape vehicles if they had to flee the estate. There’s likely a tunnel too.

“You know I don’t approve.”

“I never thought you would.” She looks at the hand that spanked her.

“Were you hoping I’d punish you?”

“Hoping? No. Expecting and accepting you would? Yes. I still needed to know if you were okay.”

“You spoke to your brothers. Why didn’t you ask?”

“I did. Enrique said you were banged up, but fine. He didn’t sound like he wanted to answer more questions, so I didn’t dare ask.

He didn’t reassure me in the least. The longer I had to think about it, the more

worried I got.

Este, I'm sorry I scared you, but I'm not sorry that I would've looked until I found you. ”

I kiss her and run my hand over her arm, shoulder blades, tits, and finally her ass. I squeeze lighter than I did earlier. She pushes her ass into my palm, wanting more. I give it to her before rolling her onto her back. I lift her arms over her head, clasping her wrists in one hand.

“Once we do this, there is no going back, Lucy. It changes everything.”

“Because I'm your best friend's little sister? Because you work for my brother who's now el jefe de jefes ? Because even though I have an IUD, nothing short of abstinence guarantees I won't get pregnant?”

“Because once I'm inside you, I'll never want to leave. Because once I'm inside you, our bodies are one. No end and no beginning. Because once I'm inside you, you've claimed me as much as I've claimed you. Because once I'm inside you, I'm yours.”

“Daddy, please.”

I thrust into her, and it's heaven.

It's sublime.

It's home.

We move together as she stretches beneath me, arching her back one moment and lifting her hips the next. I pinch her nipple and twist, giving her a burst of pain I know she enjoys. I remember her conversation with Catalina the first time I watched her.



“You won’t break me. I want more, Estebear.” She winks at me. “You’re huge, and I want to make you roar.”

I lower myself onto my forearms, ignoring how my ribs scream in protest. My dick’s loving every minute of this.

So are my mind and heart. The rest of my body is ready to commit mutiny.

But I won’t stop until I feel her pussy contract around me, and I watch her cheeks flush as I make her come.

My right hand rests heavily across her throat, but I don’t tighten.

My thumb strokes her jaw. When she tilts her head, I press incrementally harder until I’ve put actual weight into my grip.

“This is what you crave. A man who’ll treat you as his equal everywhere, always, but one who’ll also shield you and protect you because you’re precious to him.

You know I’m a man who craves control, who needs it to survive.

You don’t give up control easily, but you will if you know the person you’re handing it over to will take care of you.

You’ll submit, and I’ll dominate when we have sex, but you know you ultimately decide what we do and don’t do.

I’ll never take complete control away from you, chiquita , but you don’t have to be alone anymore. ”

I finally squeeze as I lower my lips to hers. The moment she opens to me, I release

my hold. I thrust once more, and I feel her body tense beneath me. She rips her mouth from mine.

“Daddy, please, may I come?”

“Sí, mi chiquita .” Yes, my little girl.

I thrust three more times as her knees press against my hips. My fourth thrust threatens to push her into the headboard and rip my stitches, but it brings on the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had.

I roll onto my back, but I bring her with me. I let go of her hands, and she wraps her arms around me as she nestles against my chest. I wonder if what I said was right or if I completely misunderstood her.

“Estebear—”

“You’re going to stick with that, aren’t you?”

“Yup. Estebear, do you have a sub?”

I freeze beneath her and look down at her. She spoke quietly, but I heard every word.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m pretty fucking positive you’re a Dom. I suspected that all along, but what you said—you understand things most men wouldn’t.”

“Are you a sub?”

“No, and I’m uncertain I want to be. I’ve always enjoyed more than just vanilla, but

you described things I've never been able to put into words before."

"I'm not a Dom, Lucy. I like things more than just vanilla too, but I've never entertained the idea of being in a D/s relationship. It's not what I envisioned with you, but I think there are elements of that we both need."

"I agree. I've sensed it since the beginning. It's why I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"It's why I knew I'd only walk away if you told me to. Even then..."

"I will never do that. I used to dream of a life that wasn't what I expected mine would become. Now I can't imagine any other life than being with you."

Ella es mi media naranja.

She is my half orange. It would lose something in translation if you didn't know it means she's my soulmate.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

Luciana

“Fuck, Estebear!”

“Shh, chiquita . The entire house will hear you.”

My fucks-better-than-a-porn-star husband laughs as he grips my hips and surges into me as I lean over the bed.

I fist the sheets and rest my face against my right forearm as I fight not to come when his hand travels over my waist and down to rub my clit.

The spreader he fastened to my ankles keeps me from shifting or stomping my foot with frustration as he brings me to the brink, then slows.

He’s been tormenting me for the past twenty minutes, and it’s blissful agony.

Just as his other hand lands across my ass, three strident knocks sound at the bedroom door.

“ Mamá .”

“ Papá .”

“ Mamá .”

“ Tenemos hambre .” We’re hungry.

Of course, Javier was the first to speak followed by his brothers Jorge and Joaquin. They all spoke together to tell us the same thing they do at least fifty times a day.

“They’re always hungry.”

“They take after their father.”

Este nips at my shoulder before kissing the crook of my neck. “My insatiable appetite is for something else.”

“Go and find your abuelita . She should be in the kitchen.”

God bless mamá . Whenever our family floods the house for the holidays, she ensures there’s enough food for all of us.

“Pablo and Juan want something to eat, too.”

“Javi, where are Tío Luis and Tía Margherita?”

“ Abuelita says they’re taking a nap, too.”

Este chokes on his laughter as we listen to our five-year-old son’s forthright answer. He regains his bearing enough to ask his own question.

“And Tía Catalina and Tío Matáis?”

“All the old people are tired and sleeping.”

It’s my turn to struggle not to laugh at six-year-old Joaquin’s disgust.

“ Tía ?”

“ Sí, Alejandro.”

Our six-year-old nephew’s out there too. I’m certain Catalina and Matáis are no more asleep than Este and me.

“I’m hungry too. Abuelita says we have to wait until dinner because we had a snack an hour ago. My tummy’s rumbling. It’s loud, tía .”

I glance over my shoulder as Este steps back. His cock glistens, and we both frown.

“See what happens when you play games?” I whisper my scolding as he kneels to unfasten the cuffs around my ankles as I reach for my dress.

“ Tío , should I tell them to leave you alone?”

Luis and Margherita’s eight-year-old son, Pablo, sounds so much older than the others.

He’s a natural leader among the group, and not because he’s the oldest. His younger brother, Juan, is the same age as Javier.

Pablo’s constantly keeping him out of trouble.

I suspect one day, even Pablo won’t be able to do enough to cover for his brother.

“We’re coming, Pablo. We’ll be out in a moment.”

I scowl as I speak. “I wish I was coming.”

“Tonight, chiquita . Promise.”

We finish dressing and step into the hallway. Only our three boys are standing in front of our door. Jorge reaches for me, and I lift the four-year-old into my arms. His slobbery thumb presses against my neck as he rests his head on my shoulder.

“I think someone needs a siesta more than a snack.”

“No, mamá . Hungry.”

I look down the hall as Margherita and Luis speak to Pablo and Juan.

Catalina and Matáis walk past them, but I don't see Alejandro.

The child is a Houdini. I bet he's already found a snack and is out on the swings in the backyard.

He can disappear before anyone notices. Scares the shit out of my sister and brother-in-law.

They swear it's why they stopped at one.

“ Ninos , come feed my nietos .”

“Yes, mamá .”

Six adult voices answer my mother as we guide most of our brood downstairs.

It doesn't matter how old any of us get, she still calls us children as she tells us to feed her grandchildren.

Unsurprising to anyone, Alejandro's dashing out of the kitchen with a handful of guava as mamá tries to catch him before he makes it to the backyard.

It only takes a few minutes to get the six kids their snacks and outside to play with Enrique who was trying to read beside the pool.

I see mamá ' s wistful expression. It's been nearly ten years since papá passed away.

We're all here to commemorate the anniversary.

Only Este and I and our boys still live in Colombia.

We're a few blocks from mamá , but the others all live in New York or New Jersey.

Este sees the other men frequently for business.

Catalina and Margherita bring their sons down here to visit every couple of months if we aren't up there, too.

But it's not the same as having everyone together for holidays or the anniversary.

The only one not married is Enrique. He'll have to one day, but for now, he's committed to being as good a jefe de jefes as papá was.

He's also the overindulgent one with the boys.

He spoils them rotten. I suspect he's the one who sent the boys upstairs to get all of us.

When he glances over at us and grins, I'm certain of it.

"Should we rescue him?" Este nudges me as all six boys crawl onto the lounge Enrique's lying on.



“Nope.”

I grin as Enrique pretends to grunt as he takes a bony elbow to the belly.

I shift to look up at my husband who’s still the most attractive man I’ve ever seen.

Little did I know that day in the cafe that as he watched me, he was coiled up, ready to strike.

He’s a lethal man who’s done things I’ll never know to protect our family.

He’s earned the nickname Cobra because he’s tall and proud, but he’s also fast and deadly.

To me, he’s the man who rescued me and has loved me unconditionally ever since we met. He’s never stopped taking care of me, and I pray we have a lifetime together. Only God can save anyone foolish enough to take him from me. Perhaps I’m a cobra too because once I sink my fangs in, I won’t let go.

“ Te amo, mi amor .”

He glances down at me, surprised by my sudden declaration.

“ Te amo, mi amorcito .” He’s called me his little love since the first time we said it to each other.

He wraps his arms around me, and I lean against him as we watch our family. I miss papá every day, but I know he’s watching us. We’ve built our lives around our family coming before all else. It’s how we survive, but it also makes us complete. Nothing will ever be more important.

Enrique Diaz never imagined going for a run would lead him to the woman of his dreams. When he demands a woman climb down her land and allow him to clean her gutters, he propels them into a relationship filled with unexpected enemies and secrets meant to remain hidden in Cartel King .

Discover the rest of the series with book one of The Cartel Brotherhood . The saga continues with Joaquin, Javier, Jorge, Alejandro, and Pablo as adults.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

Esteban

We'll never put Josue's murder behind us, but Lucy and I are finally free of the aftermath of the past six months. Enrique, Luis, and I pulled every string we could find to get Humberto extradited from the States to Colombia. It cost Enrique a small country's annual GDP to make it happen. There are several senior federal agents who can retire now and live a life of luxury. Humberto never made it into the Colombian government's custody, and no one there was in a rush to find him.

Cartel King

BOOK ONE SNEAK PEEK

ENRIQUE

She's going to fall off that fucking ladder.

I slow my pace to a jog as I approach a house with a woman far too high on her ladder, leaning far too much to the right as she tries to fish something out of her gutters. She's got to be about five-five to my six-three.

I could reach whatever she's fishing around for. She's more likely to fall off and break something. I should mind my own business and keep going with my run, but there's no way I'm doing that. I wouldn't if it were a woman of any age, and I wouldn't if it were an elderly person, either.

If it were a guy my age, maybe I'd let him deal with it, but for her—there's something in how she's reaching. Some frustration I can feel even from here. I approach slowly as I walk up the driveway. I'm only halfway to her when a humongous dog comes bounding toward me.

No wonder there's a baby gate across the entrance to her open garage.

The massive beast doesn't bark, but he growls.

It's a Mastiff, much like the one Laura Kutsenko has, except this one is a different

color and easily weighs about fifty pounds more than her giant companion.

I wonder if this one is as much of a love bug as Laura's.

At least, that's what she's always claimed.

The woman on the ladder speaks to her dog, giving him a command.

"Hush, Constantine. Lie down."

The dog immediately obeys, but he inches closer to the baby gate, still growling at me. It's only then that the woman notices me. She grips the ladder as she jerks away. I hurry over and grab the ladder, tempted to demand she come down from there.

"Who are you?"

If anybody's going to do the demanding, apparently it's her. Not that I can blame the woman, since I'm a complete stranger.

"I'm Enrique. I saw you as I was running. You looked a little wobbly up there."

"Well, I was okay until I was startled—but thank you."

Dismissive is the only way to describe her now. I don't blame her for that either. She's a woman in a precarious position with a strange man looking up at her. Now that I'm certain the ladder won't fall over, I step away. I don't need to look like a perv staring up her shorts.

"Would you like some help? I can easily reach whatever you're going for."

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:55 pm*

Bratva Darling

BOOK ONE SNEAK PEEK

LAURA

As I sit across from the four Kutsenko brothers, I press my lips together to keep from drooling.

No four men should be so strikingly handsome.

Not all from the same family, anyway. I fight a valiant battle against letting my gaze drift toward the eldest, Maksim, whose ice-blue eyes bore into me.

After years of negotiating billion-dollar investment contracts while facing countless ruthless businessmen, I've learned to keep my expression studiously blank.

But it's a true struggle today. Instead, I focus my attention on the squirrely lawyer sitting across the conference table.

While he's disingenuous with each comment, he's a good negotiator. But I'm better. How cliché am I?

While I feel Maksim watching me, I focus on Dmitry Yakovitch as he continues to argue the merits of the venture capitalist company I represent, RK Capital Group, merging with Kutsenko Partners.

What he means is the merits of Kutsenko Partners acquiring RK Capital Group, then stripping it and making it another money-laundering shell corporation.

While most people in New York have little awareness of the Russian mafia, I do.

The Kutsenko brothers' names appear on no titles or deeds anywhere in New York City, but it wasn't difficult to determine which shell companies likely belong to them.

Their assumption that I'm unfamiliar with them is proving beneficial to me as they continue to whisper amongst themselves in Russian.

I think they may even believe they're convincing me that they don't speak much English.

The senior partners of RK Capital Group know who I'm negotiating with, though they may not know I'm aware of these Russians' more nefarious operations.

They've given me the go-ahead to agree to a merger with an eventual acquisition, but only for the right price.

A price to the tune of twenty billion dollars.

Considering an investment firm like Goldman Sachs is worth nearly one-hundred-and-twenty billion dollars, my clients' asking price appears reasonable.

"Mr. Yakovitch, I shall stop you now." I raise my left hand, pen caught between my index and middle fingers.

When I have his attention, I lean back in my chair and casually twirl the pen over my index finger and thumb.

“Fifty billion is my clients’ asking price.

You know that. Your clients know that. RK doesn’t oppose the merger.

What they oppose is the insulting offer you’ve made.

It’s nearly noon, and I’m hungry, Mr. Yakovitch.

I have a delicious ham sandwich waiting for me.

I even have three chocolate chip cookies waiting for me.

If we aren’t going to make any progress, I shall let you go, so I can move onto my eagerly anticipated lunch. ”

I cant my head just enough for me to appear as though my gaze rests solely on the opposing attorney’s face, but I can see each Kutsenko brothers’ reaction.

My face battles yet again against showing my emotions as I fight not to smirk.

Their muted but surprised expressions confirm what I already know.

“Please tell your clients to make a reasonable counteroffer, or I will conclude this meeting and enjoy my ham sandwich and cookies.”

Dmitry glares at me before turning to Maksim and his three brothers.

In rapid Russian, he doesn’t interpret my suggestion.

Oh no. There’s no need for that. I can’t catch every word because his voice is too low.



But I catch something along the lines of “The bitch refuses to budge. What now? A fucking ham sandwich. More like a stick up her ass.”

Maksim swivels his chair to look at his brothers. In Russian, he says, “Fifty billion is ridiculous. She’s not so stupid or naïve not to know that. My guess is they’ll settle for twenty billion. We offer fifteen.”

“That’s barely better than what we already offered,” Aleksei, the second-oldest brother, argues. “She’ll be eating the fucking sandwich and dipping her cookies in milk before we walk out the door. We need the buildings.”

“We offer twenty, Maks,” Bogdan, the youngest, insists.

As I watch the brothers discuss, their voices barely lowered, I pull my lunch sack from the black leather satchel by my feet and set it beside my laptop.

It’s a ridiculously pink floral bag with an embroidered monogram, the L and D overlapping.

It’s an empty prop, but they don’t know that.

I watch as five sets of eyes narrow. I offer a smile that would appear innocent in any setting other than this meeting. It’s patronizing, and I know it.

Bratva Sweetheart

Bratva Treasure

Bratva Beauty

Bratva Angel

Bratva Jewel

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Mafia Heir

BOOK ONE SNEAK PEEK

LUCA

This asshole is pissing me off. We've been going around in circles for five minutes, and the longer we stand out here, the greater the likelihood someone will spot us. I have a sixth sense about these things. It's why I'm still alive at the ripe old age of thirty-one.

"Espinoza, enough already. Either sell to us or don't, but we set the price. Your tequila is good, but it isn't nectar from the gods."

I'm watching Carlos Espinoza, some lackey for the Mexican Culiacán Cartel, try to maneuver me into paying more than the agreed upon price. I know it's so he can skim off the top.

"It's as close as you're going to get. You've upped the order, so the price per case goes up."

My uncle, Salvatore Mancinelli, is the New York don. He negotiated this deal, and I warned him it was a bad idea. But what do I know as his underboss and heir? I'm not backing down.

"Haven't you ever heard of a bulk discount?"

The more I order the better the price should be.

No one else around here is buying from you.

You know we're your only choice in three out of five boroughs.

You aren't going to the Bronx because you won't get more than pennies there.

You aren't going to Queens because you don't want to run into the Colombians.

You aren't going to Manhattan because then you face the bratva along with us.

And what are you going to do in Staten Island?

Sell to us anyway? We control Staten Island and Brooklyn when it comes to liquor stores, so take the money and go. ”

“Luca, there are plenty of liquor stores in Brooklyn that aren't owned by Italians. I'll go there.”

We aren't friends. He's patronizing me by using my first name. Fuck him and the horse he rode in on. I have other solutions for this shit.

“And I'll just take what I want from them for free. That's not a half bad idea. The deal's over. Take your shit with the worm in it and go.”

“Motherfucking racist. Not all tequila has a worm in it.”

“You're selling Mezcal. It's known for the fucking worm. I wouldn't start calling me names, you penche hijo de puta. ” Fucking son of a bitch.

He has twenty-five crates of stolen tequila that he's trying to offload because he

knows he can't sell it at his own liquor store.

"What did you call me?"

Carlos takes what he thinks is a menacing step forward, and his two bodyguards do the same.

Not smart. Neither of my two bodyguards nor I react, but the three men in each of my cars open their doors.

They won't do more than that. It's just a reminder that the Culiacán can try, but the Cosa Nostra still run New York City.

"This is the third and final time I say this. Sell or leave."

Every head turns toward the liquor store's back door as it opens.

A gorgeous blonde steps out, and I wish I had the time to appreciate her beauty, but she's about to die.

Carlos and his men draw their guns and pivot toward her.

My men pull their weapons too, but we keep them pointed at the Mexicans.

The woman stands like a deer in the headlights for a second before ducking behind the industrial garbage dumpster like a frightened rabbit.

Three shots hit the metal almost at the same moment.

That's all it takes for my men and me. The two bodyguards standing with me aim for a guard each, and I set my sights on Carlos.

We squeeze our triggers, and the men fall.

Screeching tires tell me Carlos's driver takes off.

I hear more gunshots as at least one soldier in my cars tries to shoot the escaping vehicle.

Glass shatters, but the sedan keeps going.

I hear more tires squeal as one of my SUVs takes off and chases the guy.

I holster my gun and wave my men to do the same.

I inch forward toward the trash can, but I see the shadow shift.

The woman bolts from the other side. She's still the frightened rabbit, but I'm the fox pursuing her.

She's fast, I'll give her that. But she has to be at least a foot shorter than me.

My legs are a lot longer and cover a lot more ground with each stride.

She weaves among the cars, most likely believing it's harder to hit a moving object. She isn't wrong, but I have no intention of shooting her. I push myself harder and pounce as she darts out and tries to cross the last stretch of parking lot to reach a better lit area near a bus stop. I lunge.

"Stop running, piccolina . I won't hurt you."

I wrap my arms around her and pull her back against my chest, but I'm quick to spin her around and put space between us as I grasp her arms. Of course, she fights me.

“If I wanted you dead, I would have shot at you, too.”

“It doesn’t mean you won’t kill me after.”

She’s breathless as she continues to struggle. I almost let go to take a step back, insulted at what she implied. But I can’t blame her. If I were a woman, I’d be terrified of the same thing.

“I’m not going to rape you. I’m going to talk to you.”

“Talk? You are not a man who talks if you just killed a guy.”

“To keep him and his men from killing you. I told you, if I wanted you dead, I would have shot at you too. And I wouldn’t have missed.”

She stops struggling against me, but her eyes continue to dart from one place to another, trying to find somewhere to flee. I know I can keep her in place with only one hand, so I release her left arm. I still have a firm hold on her right one, but I haven’t held it nearly as tightly as I could.

“I’m Luca. I know you figured out you interrupted something you shouldn’t have. Did that man know who you are?”

“Yes.”

“What about his driver? Would he know you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a name?”

“Yes.”

“Piccolina , we won’t get very far if yes is all you can say. Are you willing to answer me with more than one word?”

“No.”

I knew that was coming, and I grin. I can’t help it. I wasn’t wrong about her being gorgeous, but I doubt she wants to know that’s what I think. At least, not if I want her to know I won’t assault her.

“Fine. I have more than twenty questions I can ask that you can answer with one word. Do you work at the store?”

“Sometimes.”

Ah, an improvement.

“Did Carlos know you were still working?”

“No.”

“Do you have a car, or do you take the subway or bus?”

She raises her chin and remains silent. Smart but counterproductive.

“The subway or the bus will get you killed. You’re too easy to find and follow. Do you have a car?”

“Yes.”

“Can you stay with someone instead of going home?”

She refuses to answer.



“If that man knew you and you sometimes work in the store, then he knew where you live. If he found that out, so will someone in his cartel.”

“I know. Let me go. The longer I stand here, the more likely someone is to come back for me.”

“No one will touch you while I’m here.”

“Arrogant. If he shot at me, he would have shot at you.”

“And he would have died, anyway. What’s your name?”

“Jane.”

“Look, I know you won’t get in one of my cars and let me drive you somewhere. In most cases, I would say that’s a smart move. But you did nothing wrong tonight except for leave work at the wrong time. I know that, and you know that. But the Culiacán won’t see it that way, *piccolina* .”

She freezes for no more than five seconds before she trembles so much that I can see it.

I don’t know what drives me next, but it’s the same instinct that’s made me call her little girl three times.

I pull her to my chest and tuck her head against it.

I stroke her hair down to her shoulders, rubbing my hand up and down her back.

This is the most inopportune moment to notice she isn’t wearing a bra. I will my body not to react.

“What does that mean?”

Her voice is barely more than a whisper, but I know what she’s asking.

“It means little girl.”

“I should be insulted, but the way you say it...”

“It has nothing to do with your height. I know you’re not a child.”

God, do I know she’s not. She feels amazing.

Her tits are soft as they press against me, and I can see she has the most delectable ass.

I’d love nothing more than to cup it and squeeze until she goes up on her toes and begs for me to wrap her legs around my waist and fuck her.

For fuck’s sake. Stop, you disgusting asshole.

That is not what you need to be thinking about.

“Why didn’t you shoot me? Whatever you were talking about, if it was with a Cartel member, then it wasn’t completely legal. Carlos didn’t want me alive to talk about seeing you together. Why are you letting me live?”

“I told you. You did nothing wrong but try to leave work. He should have checked the building before starting the meeting. That was on him. The only thing I take issue with is you leaving by yourself and walking into a dimly lit parking lot. I suspect you do that often, and that’s too dangerous. Jane Doe, I don’t hurt women.”

Mafia Sinner

Mafia Beauty

Mafia Angel

Mafia Redeemer

Mafia Star

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